THE TRIAL OF

Tanya von Degurechaff

"A YOUNG WOMAN'S LEGAL DEFENCE"

Fic by LordsFire

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Part 1.

A/N: This rises from a thought that struck me when I read the arc at the beginning of 'A Young Woman's Delinquent Record,' where Tanya was on trial for war crimes. This is not attached to that story's timeline (and certainly not attached to its tone or mood), but I felt it appropriate to mention that the basic idea came to me when reading that.

Lawrence Johnson didn't think of himself as a bigshot lawyer, and while he'd defended in several reasonably contentious cases during his decade of practicing law, he suspected that the reason he had been given this case, was because the people handing it out thought he was the least-successful lawyer they could get away with giving it to, without obviously having thrown the case altogether.

Before the bombing at Brest, Tanya von Degurechaff had been a fairly well-known name, but as much for the dissonance of what she was, as what she had done. There were other Germanian officers who were accused of committing war crimes, but stack on that she had her first combat encounter when she was less than ten years old, and earned the epithet 'Devil of the Rhine' before she was thirteen…

Well, she was certainly a more shocking figure than some Hans or Fritz who could have been cast on either the hero or villain's side of a swordfight in the latest moving picture out of Hollywood. Seeing what images the Imperial Army saw fit to release of her just drove the point home further; she looked like a rich girl's doll, pale, slender, blonde, and with an artificial smile on her face for the camera.

Reading what the Germanians had provided of her service jacket, the charges that the Francois and Dacians had leveled against her, none of that prepared Lawrence for actually meeting her for the first time.

Being held in the literal Tower of Londinium, Lawrence was led by a pair of Albish Royal Mages through two fortress walls, before being handed off to a pair of Royal Aerial Mages at the gate to one of the castle complex's ancient structures. The two of them immediately lead him two floors down, where another pair of mages stood guard over an Iron cell door.

Unlike most guards stationed at a door, they stood not with their backs to the door, looking outwards, but instead facing the door, one just outside of arm's reach of said door, the other a half-dozen yards down the hall.

All of the guards served their posts with the blank-faced impassivity the royal guards were famed for, and didn't speak a word during the entire march to Degurechaff's cell. The closer of the door guards gestured for Lawrence to present his credentials, and once he did, the second guard approached to keep his rifle trained on the cell door, while the other opened it.

Within, sat a tiny blonde girl, that at first glance, Lawrence found himself again reminded of a doll. The moment he stepped into the cell and could see her eyes, however, he was struck by a profound wrongness that went far past the resemblance to a wealthy child's plaything.

Her eyes were every bit as blank as the British guards' were.

"I'm Lawrence Johnson," he said as the guard closed the door behind him, as much to force himself not to lock up as to follow etiquette, "Attorney at law. I've been selected to serve as your defense attorney."

"An American?" she said in Albish with surprisingly little accent, the faintest hint of curiosity in her tone of voice, as she tilted her head to the side in a sick parody of a normal human girl.

"...It was concluded that as aside from a small scattering of private citizens volunteering," Lawrence said, still trying to not lock up at the empty eyes of the girl in front of him, "There has been no direct American involvement in the fighting thus far, and the Germanian Empire poses no direct military threat to the Unified States, one of us would be the best chance for both appearing unbiased, and actually being such."

"I see," Degurechaff said, her head straightening for a moment before she nodded respectfully, "Thank you for your service. I had not expected to be granted defense attorney at all."

"I was under the impression defense attorneys were required by military law in the Imperial Military?" Lawrence replied.

"They are," Degurechaff replied with a blink, "I was under the impression that this trial was a formality and opportunity for a media circus."

"Why would you think that?" Lawrence asked.

"This entire procedure is unlawful," Degurechaff replied, "All of my actions are clearly within the laws of war."

"Tens of thousands died at Brest," Lawrence said, struggling to keep incredulity from his voice.

"The Francois were in the act of violating the laws of war by engaging in false surrender," Degurechaff replied without hesitation, "When we bombed their military transports. It is regrettable that the Type-95's unstable nature resulted in collateral damage to the civilian population of Brest, but the Francois chose to commit war crimes at a civilian port facility. I and the Imperial Army bear no responsibility for their choice of venue."

It's like talking to an accountant about the fine details of tax law, Lawrence thought, forcing himself to somewhat jerkily sit down at the small utilitarian desk that had been added to the cell in preparation for his arrival, Does she actually believe that?

More importantly, is it actually true?

...At least it was clear that his client intended to plead not guilty.

Where do I even start?

At the beginning of the sequence of events that led to the alleged crime, the voice of Lawrence's favorite professor at law school sounded in his head, and he shook himself, and brought out his briefcase to begin laying out the most critical documentation around the case.

"Tanya von Degurechaff," he began, "According to the documents that I was provided, you were raised in an orphanage, but after testing positive for mage potential, you volunteered to join the Imperial Army at age eight, and completed training at age nine, being added to the 27th Artillery Battalion as a Warrant Officer, Aerial Reconnaissance Mage.

The Trial of Tanya Von Degurechaff

"Tell me Tanya, why did you join the military at age eight?"

"It is the patriotic duty of all mages to join the military and fight for the Fatherland," Tanya replied immediately, leaning forward with a strained semblance of passion in her voice.

A shiver went down Lawrence's spine, and he was almost overwhelmed by the sheer sense of wrongness that rolled off the young woma-no, he couldn't even call her that-rolled off of the girl in front of him. For a moment, he was tempted to pack his suitcase right back up, leave the cell, and wash his hands of the clearly mentally unstable girl.

God help me, he thought, reaching up to scrub his face.

"Major Degurechaff," he said, his hands over his eyes, "Do you really expect me to believe that an eight-year-old girl wanted to join the Imperial Germanian Army out of patriotic fervor?"

"The Imperial Germanian Army does," Degurechaff replied, and Lawrence lifted his hand to see that her eyes and expression were as blank as ever.

It took a moment for the full import of that statement to rattle its way through Lawrence's skull, and he could see the moment of realization on Degurechaff's face as she realized just what her specific wording implied.

"Please excuse me," she began, the flicker of realization already covered by a more-exaggerated attempt to appear enthusiastic, "Albish is not my first language, I meant to say-"

"I think you said exactly what you meant," Lawrence said leaning forward as he saw panic flicker across Degurechaff's expression for a brief moment, the first real emotion he had ever seen from her, "I'm not certain if you are familiar with American legal codes, but we practice something called Attorney-Client Privilege. Anything that you say to me for as long as I am your defense lawyer is held in absolute confidence. Even if I later drop or am removed from the case, that is still privileged information."

"Then it is all the more important that I correct my poor wording," Degurechaff began, her voice strained as she attempted to conceal her fear, and Lawrence could

immediately tell that she believed that any and everything she said was being reported to others.

"Stop," he interrupted, leaning further forward, "I don't think you understand. This isn't simply a matter of custom, if I break Attorney-Client Privilege, my reputation will be destroyed, I'll lose my job, and I'll be disbarred, destroying my entire career, leaving me destitute."

For a few moments, Degurechaff almost vibrated in place as she visibly tried to bottle up her thoughts and emotions, before she finally settled in place, and slowly nodded.

"There is still the matter of Albish listening devices and sensory-enhancement spells from their mages," Degurechaff said, her voice returning to the calm emptiness that she had first greeted him with.

"...I don't want to cast aspersions on the character of our hosts," Lawrence said, glancing back at the cell door, "But I can understand why someone in your position would not be feeling very trusting right now."

He pulled a blank sheet of paper and one of his better pens out of his briefcase, and offered them to Degurechaff.

"Can you tell me the story of why you joined the army in writing?" he asked, "And how that eventually led to the bombing at Brest? I can read Germanian, though my spoken accent is atrocious."

The girl nodded, accepted the pair of implements, and began to write.

After ten minutes, she flipped the page and continued to write. Ten minutes after that, she held out a hand for another page; Lawrence gave it.

Three hours later, he briefly left the cell to get more paper.

By the end of the night, reading each page of Tanya's story as soon as it finished, he was confident that he had something to work with.

AN: I'll be posting this piece by piece until it's finished, at about 13k words.

Part 2.

"With that, the prosecution rests," the Francois lawyer declared, returning to his seat.

Lawrence found himself strangely disappointed. For all the rhetorical skill and lurid imagery of death and destruction that the prosecutor had used, it was actually underwhelming compared to the cold, clinical precision that Degurechaff had described her experiences and actions with. If it were not for how her hands trembled as she wrote her account of the slaughter at Arene, he might have believed her a cold-blooded killer, instead of the bloodthirsty lunatic the prosecutor suggested.

In all, rather than needing a break before beginning to present his defense, he instead needed to restrain himself for a few moments before rising to his feet.

"If it pleases the court," Lawrence declared, "The Defense will call its first witness, Major Degurechaff herself."

The Francois lawyer's eyes widened as a feral smile spread across his face; the prosecution could not force a defendant to take the stand, but once they chose to testify, they could not deny the prosecutor the chance to cross-examine.

"The court is pleased to allow Major Degurechaff to take the stand," the chief justice declared, and Tanya rose from her position beside Lawrence, marching stiffly up to the witness stand.

She took her seat, and Lawrence had to suppress a hysterical giggle. Her uniform hat, which Lawrence had insisted she wear, was the only thing visible over the edge of the witness box, because the girl was so short.

"Bailiff," the judge sighed, "Fetch a few thick books for the Major to sit on."

Tiny hands reached up and grasped the edge of the box, and Tanya stood herself upright atop her chair while she waited for the judge's order to be followed. Even standing on top of the chair, she was barely taller than any of the prosecution's witnesses had been sitting, and her tiny, custom-made uniform made her look like a child playing at being a soldier.

Her uniform hat, being the only part of her uniform that was of standard size, drew further attention to just how small the girl was, so much larger than her head that rather than resting atop it, it fell down to her ears and concealed most of her forehead. Lawrence meant to use everything he could to make her appearance in the court as absurd as her presence on the battlefield had been.

Once the bailiff returned with a few law manuals, Lawrence stood and approached the stand as the bailiff put the books into place on Degurechaff's chair. Once she had seated herself again, she had just enough height and reach to lean forward and rest her hands on the edge of the wooden box that formed the stand.

"Major Degurechaff," Lawrence began, "You are somewhat well-known within the Imperial Army for being a prodigy, correct?"

"I am," Degurechaff said, her tone as flat as her expression.

"While your battlefield exploits are very well known among your enemies," Lawrence continued, "Would it be fair to say that you are also known for your intellectual and academic abilities among those familiar with you personally and professionally within the Imperial Army?"

"It would," Tanya replied flatly.

"So then," Lawrence said, "You are well familiar with the laws of war, both international, and those particular to the Imperial Army, correct?"

"Correct."

"Tell me Major," Lawrence asked, "What is the punishment for disobeying a direct order during active combat in a time of war?"

"Death," Tanya replied, her tone still flat, but now heavy with a formless weight as her grip on the edge of the witness box tightened, "By firing squad."

"I see," Lawrence said, "Now as I believe all present here recall, you were present at the very first engagement during the war, up along the Norden-Germanian Border, correct?"

"Correct."

"You were assigned to a standard aerial reconnaissance role," Lawrence continued, moving back towards the defense's table, "Where you were keeping watch on the border, looking for the movement of both ground forces and enemy aerial mages, correct?"

"Correct."

"According to the after-action reports from both the Imperial Army, and the Entente Armed Forces," Lawrence said, picking up two small files, "As the initial engagement began, you encountered an entire squadron of Entente aerial mages attempting to push out over Imperial lines, correct?"

"Correct."

"I would like to enter these two after-action reports into evidence," Lawrence declared, "As the records branches of the two respective militaries can confirm, these are not copies made or stolen by intelligence officers, but taken directly from the archives of both militaries."

"You may enter them into evidence," the chief judge declared.

"Thank you, your honor," Lawrence said with a nod, placing the two files on the appropriate table before turning to face Degurechaff again and continuing, "How many mages were with the enemy forces?"

"...I recall spotting twelve," Tanya said, and even with a moment's delay to visibly recollect that evening's events, her tone was as flat and devoid of emotion as in any of her other replies.

Lawrence hadn't even needed to coach her to speak in such a way.

"As expected of a recon mage," Lawrence continued, "You reported the enemy movements back to your commanding officers, correct?"

"Correct."

"Now," Lawrence said, glancing down at the folder marked with the Imperial Army's stationary, and opening it to the page he had pre-selected to be on top before bringing it to the trial, "When you delivered your report, what orders did you receive in return?"

"I was ordered to attack the enemy," Tanya replied, "And keep them in place until reinforcements arrived."

Lawrence lifted the page out of the file, and read aloud.

"Warrant Officer third-class Degurechaff ordered to hold Entente Aerial Mage squadron in place until reinforcements could arrive in approximately a quarter hour," he read, before putting the paper down, "I'm sure other linguists would give a slightly different translation, but if you read it in its original Germanian, members of the tribunal will see that I have conveyed the intent reasonably well."

He paused for a moment for effect, before putting the paper back down, and turning his full attention to Degurechaff again.

"How old were you when you received this order?" Lawrence asked.

"I had turned nine two months prior," Tanya said, her voice as flat and devoid of emotion as with any other response she had given.

"So you were nine years old," Lawrence said, "And you received orders to assault an entire Squadron of hostile aerial mages. You are known to have a high opinion of your own combat capabilities Major, at the time, what did you estimate your odds of surviving the attack were?"

"I had no expectation of success," Tanya said just as flatly, though her grip on the edge of the witness box had tightened further, "I lacked any combat experience to give me an adequate ability to calculate my odds of survival accurately. Based purely on my lack of ability to adequately gauge the situation, I expected defeat, with a high probability of death."

"If you did not expect to win the engagement," Lawrence asked, "Why didn't you retreat in the face of numerically and experientially superior enemy forces?"

"That would require that I disobey a direct order during time of war," Tanya said, her tone still flat, but now suggesting a heavy weight behind it.

"Which is an offense punishable by death?" Lawrence pressed.

"Correct."

Lawrence allowed silence to settle over the courtroom for several long seconds before moving on.

"As is public record," Lawrence continued, "You received the Argent Silver Assault Badge for your 'heroic action' during that engagement. How did you feel about receiving the medal? Please take as much time as you need to answer in full detail."

Degurechaff blinked, and for just a moment, her eyes narrowed fractionally as she concentrated on bringing up memories of the past

"Initially," she replied, "Confusion. I had simply followed my orders. Once the press arrived at my hospital room, it became clear that this was a matter of publicity, intended to avoid averse perception of the military by the public, and build morale through focus on victory against overwhelming odds."

"Overwhelming odds?" Lawrence asked, "How could they have been overwhelming if you won?"

"I was overwhelmed," Tanya replied bluntly, "Superior volume of fire allowed the enemy to penetrate my shield, injure me and force me into a semi-crash landing. They had domination of the airspace, and could have proceeded to bombard our artillery batteries before reinforcements arrived to stop them. Their retreat was illogical."

"You didn't think that fighting a single Germanian Aerial Mage, a child no less, who killed several members of their squadron and injured several more, might have intimidated them into retreating?"

"If they had judged me a threat beyond their capacity to handle," Tanya said, her voice as flat as ever, "They would have retreated while I was still combat capable. Once I was incapacitated, there was no rational reason not to complete their objective. In failing to do so, they wasted their comrades' sacrifices, and allowed hundreds of casualties to be inflicted on Entente ground forces by Imperial artillery."

"So you would say they failed to fulfill their orders?" Lawrence asked, "And demonstrated cowardice in the face of the enemy?"

"Correct," Tanya said, staring unblinking at Lawrence.

"What do you expect happened to them after they returned?" Lawrence asked.

"The commander was doubtless shot," Tanya replied without hesitation, "And the survivors who were not incapacitated in their engagement with me were put before the tribunal. I believe under Entente military law, their own punishments would have been joining their commander in front of the firing squad, or being flogged and reduced to enlisted rank."

"Do you believe this would be fitting punishment?" Lawrence asked.

"They were directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of their countrymen," Tanya replied, "And their failure to take out Imperial artillery batteries turned a probable defeat in the opening action of the war into a certain defeat. This is why the punishment for cowardice in the face of the enemy is death."

"I see," Lawrence replied, "So, to review. Your first combat action, undertaken when you were nine years old, just months after you had completed your intake training as an Aerial Mage, saw all of the following:

"Contact with an enemy force that outnumbered you twelve to one.

"Orders to make a suicide attack against said enemies, under threat of execution if you refused to obey.

"Serious injury suffered on your part during the engagement, bad enough that you were crippled and rendered unconscious.

"Concluding with the Imperial Military awarding you their highest citation for bravery, in an attempt to turn the bad optics of sending a child to die, into a PR coup.

"Is this an accurate summation of your first engagement?"

"...Nothing you have said is untrue," Tanya said, a tight frown forming on her face, "However, it is not an accurate summation of the engagement. It leaves out many critical details, both tactically and its strategic importance, as well as casting-"

"I understand," Lawrence said, raising an arm placatingly towards Tanya, "However, I'm not a military man, so the ebb and flow of battle isn't my field of expertise, even if I try

to keep read up on things. I'll leave covering those details to one of the military lawyers present."

Left unspoken was that all the military lawyers taking part in the proceedings were doing so as part of the prosecution.

"Was that an offer to allow the prosecution the chance to cross-examine?" The chief justice asked.

"So long as I am permitted to continue after the matter of the Norden engagement is covered to the prosecution's satisfaction," Lawrence replied, "Given the number of incidents involved, I think we would all prefer to handle them one by one."

The five judges on the panel turned to the prosecution, and after a few moments of quiet discussion together, the prosecution agreed to the arrangement.

"I know you wouldn't do this without a reason," Cara, Lawrence's paralegal/secretary said quietly as the prosecution began a methodical, blow-by-blow deconstruction of Tanya's first combat engagement, "But I can't really see what it is right now."

"They're going to try to get her to crack," Lawrence whispered quietly back, "To show some bloodthirst or similar. It isn't going to work though; they're under the wrong set of operating assumptions. They think she really is 'the Devil of the Rhine,' but they're wrong.

"She thinks and operates like a machine as much as she can. This kind of questioning actually plays exactly to her strengths, because she's going to be more meticulous about the details than any of them are. This kind of offensive will wear them out before it wears her out, if it wears her out at all."

"I'm not sure if that's encouraging or scary," Cara said, glancing back and forth between the Lieutenant-Colonel currently asking questions, and Tanya, "You've said she isn't a monster, but she's still clearly a killer."

"I said I don't think she's a monster," Lawrence replied, "I'm not entirely sure yet, and even if she isn't, that doesn't mean she can't become one. Someone with that much

familiarity with killing… even if we can get her off the battlefield, she might not be able to leave it behind."

The defense's first day took the trial in an unexpected direction. While most legal experts have predicted either a plea bargain for life imprisonment or attempting to shift responsibility to those who issued the explosive device used at Brest, instead, it appears that the defense actually intends to attempt a *Not Guilty* ruling on at least some of the charges.

It's also possible that by focusing on the initial engagement over Norden, they hope to build sympathy to this *child-soldier*, but while that may be understandable for the first engagement, in which only soldiers died, it is difficult to believe the defense expects such an approach to carry much weight when the weight of blood shed in the Francois Republic comes to the forefront of the case…

> –Excerpt from *The Londinium Times* article released in the first week of the trial of Major Tanya Degurechaff.

AN: I'm not sure how much more was on my snippet thread. I'll try to at least post more than was there tonight. I'm spacing it out because I'm hoping for feedback on individual parts where I can get it.

Part 3.

"Well," Lawrence said, sitting down with Tanya in her cell once again, "The details of your tactical explanations were somewhat beyond me, but you did a very good job conveying yourself as an extremely professional officer. What was your impression of the first day of our defense?"

"The prosecutors should be stripped of their rank and forced into remedial training," Tanya replied harshly, "Their inability to grasp basic tactics demonstrates they are unfit for command."

"...They're staff officers," Lawrence pointed out, "They're expected to handle matters of military law, not command men."

"They are not fit to judge those who make life-and-death decisions in the heat of battle," Tanya said, decisively, shaking her head sharply, "If they have never commanded, and lack even understanding of how to command, they are not fit to judge. They can serve as Warrant Officers and advise those who are fit on the fine details of the law instead."

"Your perception of them may be rather biased," Lawrence pointed out, still caught somewhat off-guard by her display of emotion, "Since they're trying to argue for your execution."

"Of course they're trying to argue for my execution," Tanya said, lurching to her feet and starting to pace impatiently around the cell, "They're blinded by their hatred; I'm the personification of the impersonal 'enemy' who killed so many of their countrymen, statistically at least one of them lost a personal acquaintance in battles in which I am involved. That they would attempt to have me executed goes without saying.

"No, the real problem is that these buffoons presume to stand in judgment over soldiers in their own armies. Men who had to make the hard decisions in a fraction of a second, where there was no option that did not result in death, and the best they could hope was for the least death. Their lack of comprehension will result in lost morale, sidelining and imprisoning of competent officers to be replaced with inferiors whose

only salient skill is covering their own asses, and generally result in more death and waste throughout the military."

"Aren't they your enemies?" Lawrence asked, genuinely bewildered.

"Not anymore," Tanya said, gesturing dismissively as she continued to pace, "The damned war is finally over, and I'll be long dead before there's any chance at another conflict beginning-"

"Dead?" Lawrence asked indignantly.

"...I do not mean any insult to your abilities as a defense attorney," Tanya said, pulling herself to a stop with a forced smile, "But do you really believe that the judge's panel doesn't already have orders about what verdict they are to find?"

"I think every participant in this trial knows what result most of their people want to find," Lawrence retorted, "But that doesn't mean the outcome is a foregone conclusion!"

"Finding me not guilty would threaten the peace," Tanya said dismissively, turning away, "No rational actor would allow that outcome for the cost of one infamous enemy officer's life. The irrational actors want me dead purely to satiate their hatred."

...It was a fairly compelling argument, and while Lawrence had quite a bit of faith in there being at least a real attempt at impartiality in the courts most of the time, this…

"God help me have faith," Lawrence murmured, closing his eyes briefly, before opening them to find Tanya staring at him, every bit of her terrifying attention one hundred percent focused on his eyes.

"What does 'god' have to do with this?" Tanya demanded, "Did he send you to sabotage my defense?"

"...What?" Lawrence asked, completely bewildered, "Why would God want to sabotage the defense of an innocent girl?"

"Since when has guilt or innocence mattered to that dictator!?" Tanya demanded, "All it cares about is getting me to submit!"

Lawrence stared at the wide-eyed girl for a long moment, trying to figure out just what was going on.

Is this the backlash for sitting on the witness stand as cool as the arctic all day? He wondered to himself, before shaking his head.

"That sounds more like a demon," he said, shaking his head, "But to get back to productive topics, I think I have an angle that you can use to make politics work in your favor. After all, no good man would send a child to fight on the front lines, especially after they've already been injured."

Tanya stared at him, her eyes and face harsh, for a long moment, before curtly nodding, and seating herself smoothly in the small chair across from him.

"No rational man would send a child to a war zone," she agreed emphatically, "So clearly Imperial High Command is not rational."

"Precisely," Lawrence said, more relieved than he wanted to admit to himself that the moment of furious intensity had passed, "If we can make your situation an indictment against the Empire, we'll be giving allied politicians the opportunity to use you as a tool against the people they really want to destroy.

"It may be a bit dehumanizing, but at this point, I think it's the best chance we have to keep politics from pressuring the bench towards a verdict."

"Not as dehumanizing as serving on the Rhine," Tanya laughed bitterly, the first laugh that he'd ever heard from her.

Hopefully the next will sound a little less unhinged, Lawrence thought with a wince.

"According to your service jacket," Lawrence said, "Your assignment to weapons testing under Doctor Schugel lasted for roughly six months, and was both started and ended by your own request. Would you care to tell the court why you first requested the assignment, and then to be removed from it?"

"Statistical odds of mortality," Tanya replied without blinking, "Based on personal observation, combat mages lasted an average of five months on the Rhine before

sustaining permanently debilitating or lethal injuries. Aerial Mages fared better in duration before serious injury, eight months, but injuries were more likely to be lethal.

"I mistakenly believed that a weapons testing role would have better survival odds."

"How mistaken were you?" Lawrence asked.

"All three prior test mages died in less than two months," Tanya said flatly, "Schugel refused every request to add standard safeties to the Elenium-95 quad-core design-"

An explosion of shocked disbelief and outrage cut her off, fully half the audience rejecting the idea that a quad-core Mage Orb had been constructed at a time when every nation outside the Germanian Empire was still struggling to get a dual-core prototype working. It took a full five minutes for the bailiff to restore order in the courtroom.

Through the entire uproar, Tanya remained impassive, watching the circus of dignitaries, reporters, and a handful of war widows with only the very faintest trace of disdain on her face.

"Major Degurechaff," the chief justice declared once quiet had returned, "The documents that were submitted to the court claimed the device used in Brest was a 'prototype advanced core,' but did not go into great detail. Why do you claim it was a quad-core orb?"

"Because it was," Tanya said, not even blinking as she met the judge's gaze, "Schugel is the definitive example of 'insane genius.' His design was visionary, but utterly impractical for actual use."

"Major," the chief justice pressed with a frown, "You do understand that no other nation has yet fielded a dual-core design; your claim this 'Type-95' possessed four cores is difficult to give credence; what of intermediary triple-core designs?"

"There was no intermediary," Tanya replied, "The Type-95 preceded the Type-97, the numbering is no accident. Schugel created the Type-95 before he even attempted a dual-core design, and would not begin work on the dual-core until I refused to continue testing with the 95 after repeated near-death experiences, ultimately destroying a significant portion of the research facility."

"What was the nature of the Type-95's flaw?" the judge asked.

"It required perfect control," Tanya said, "And had deleterious effects on the mind of the user."

"All military orbs require fine control to make proper use of," one of the other judges, an actual combat mage, replied, "That is not exceptional."

"I did not exaggerate," Tanya replied sharply, emotion starting to seep into her voice for the first time since the trial began, "It required perfect control. At first I could only activate it for seconds before it would spin out of alignment, and it took weeks of training to exceed a single minute. Further, the longer I activated it, the more time before its effects on my thoughts would fade.

"Schugel blamed 'incompetence' on the part of test mages for his design's failure to perform, which demonstrates his insanity. No human can sustain perfection for more than brief periods."

"And yet you could use this Type-95?" the mage asked.

"As I said," Tanya replied, "For brief periods. It was issued to me to carry on the front since every other mage who attempted its use had died. I only used it three times after being permitted to leave the program, the Type-97 was vastly preferable for its superior characteristics in not killing the end user, and not warping their mind into delusions of sacrilegious grandeur."

"We're getting off track here," the chief justice said with a frown, "Let it be known that the court does not appreciate that relevant details were withheld from the documents submitted for the trial. We will be subpoenaing the Imperial government for relevant records of the Elenium Type-95, and if they do not deliver them before this trial reaches the events at Brest, this panel will find them to have violated the terms of the armistice.

"Mister Lawrence, you may continue."

"Thank you, your honor," Lawrence said, before turning his attention back to Tanya, "As you've already started on the matter of Doctor Schugel and his eccentricities, could you please give us your full analysis of his character?"

"Doctor Schugel was a man so consumed by his vision he lost all contact with reality," Tanya said bluntly, settling back into her usual cool and detached persona, "He believed his vision to be perfect, and that reality must be made to conform to it. Any who tried to draw attention to practical limitations or protested his poor treatment of other employees would be subject to his explosive temper. He saw any who disagreed with him as fools, defective and useless to his work."

"And his work had seen several other test mages killed before you?" Lawrence asked.

"Yes," Tanya replied, "Every mage who tested the Elenium Type-95 before me died due to its volatility and lack of safety mechanisms. Part of the reason I accepted it being issued to me rather than attempting to return it, was to prevent the loss of further valuable human resources if Schugel was able to begin attempting further testing with other mages. I don't know how much the mental contamination affected them before they died; they might not have lasted long enough to notice it."

"I assume this was also the reason for which you repeatedly requested to be transferred away from Doctor Schugel's research team," Lawrence said, "Ultimately requesting a return to the Rhine front?"

"Odds of mortality under Doctor Schugel were seventy-five percent," Tanya said flatly, "And that is disregarding the matter of potential identity death due to induced insanity. On the Rhine, odds of mortality were under forty percent, and shell-shock can be recovered from with time. Returning to the trenches was the only rational option."

Cross-examination regarding Degurechaff's time as a weapon's tester didn't last long, and was mostly a thinly-veiled attempt to pry useful information on quad-core technology out of her. Lawrence wasn't impressed by the prosecution's conduct, even as it helped his client's case by making it obvious the prosecution was willing to act on ulterior motives.

Degurechaff's greatest weapon was, again, her continued glacial calm. If the prosecution had been on the ball, they would have recognized how Schugel was an emotional weak point for her, and tried to prod her until she cracked. Instead, they focused on the Type-95. That was a mostly futile effort, as Degurechaff had the

knowledge of an operator, not an engineer or an artisan, and an operator who actively shunned the device at that.

The real conflict would begin when it came to Tanya's return to the front, and her unparalleled skill at cutting down allied forces. That was where she had gone from one among many enemies hated for exceptional ability, to the single nail that stood out the most, above all others, and thus earned the hammer's ire.

Schugel was a busy man, even with all the limitations that had been placed on his work after the incident at Brest.

Still, given how many times externalities had interfered with his reasarch now, he had chosen to at least peruse the newspaper on a biweekly basis, to see if anything that might cause disruptions had happened, so that he could prepare for such.

So it was that he discovered the trial of Major Degurechaff, his finest test subject, and chose to read over the article, which contained a transcript of parts of the trial.

Blasphemy.

The transcript contained blasphemy.

He would have to set right these purveyors of false doctrine personally.

"They're going to bring other members of the 203rd to testify," Lawrence said, setting his suitcase on the small desk, "Is there anything your overview didn't cover that I should be worried about?"

Degurechaff frowned for a long moment, before nodding her head.

"Doubtless they have been offered plea bargains if they testify against me," Tanya said, "It is disappointing, but unsurprising. It is only rational for them to act in their own self-interest, especially if they are operating on the assumption that my sentence is already ensured by political necessity."

"...They aren't even being put on trial," Lawrence said, again confused by the strange reasoning the young woman used, "You being put on trial was part of the armistice, not them."

"Oh!" Tanya said brightening up, "Then we have nothing to worry about. While some may consider me harsh, we sustained zero combat fatalities during all operations. I am certain their testimonies will only improve my defense."

Her mood turns so easily, Lawrence thought, shaking his head, In some ways, she is still a child. It's a tragedy what this war has done to her.

"So there aren't any 'minor' incidents I should worry about that they might bring up?" Lawrence asked.

"Nein," Tanya said, shaking her head, "My conduct with the 203rd has at all times been as expected as an officer of the Imperial Germanian Army."

Part 4.

A/N: sleep is the enemy.

"She rotated between three different artillery batteries for use as training tools," Lieutenant Grantz said calmly and straight-faced, "Barrel overheating could become a problem in particularly strenuous exercises, and it doubled as training for rookie artillery crews."

Lawrence resisted the urge to drop his face into his hands.

'Rigorous training exercises' does not cover firing artillery at your own men! He thought furiously, glancing sideways at Tanya, who was watching the witness testimony with the same detachment as she had watched the majority of the trial.

Glancing back and forth between the major and the junior officer detailing the training regimen the 203rd had been put through before their first combat deployment, he realized with some dawning horror, that she really didn't see anything wrong with what she'd done.

Of course not, why would she? She thought she lived with a gun to her head at all times if she failed to fulfill impossibly high standards at every turn. By that point she'd faced overwhelming odds, fought on the bloodiest part of the front for months, and nearly died during her one deployment off the lines. Why would she expect anything else?

Lawrence, though, was the only one with a full insight into the mind of his client. The audience in the courtroom was horrified, the prosecution were gleeful, and the judges' panel was grim. None of them were seeing things through the eyes of Tanya von Degurechaff yet.

But that was Lawrence's job, and with every witness from the 203rd that the prosecution called, he would have another opportunity to round out their perspective of the tiny powerhouse during cross-examination.

"Lieutenant Grantz," Lawrence began, "In your personal judgement, is Major von Degurechaff a good or a bad officer."

"Major Degurechaff is an exemplary military officer in all regards," Grantz said crisply, his surprisingly fluent English tinged with the precise accent and swift speech many Germanians had, "She is disciplined, skilled in personal combat, command, tactics, strategy, and has an exceptional capacity for anticipating the enemy and counteracting their tactics. If she possesses a single flaw, it is perhaps an excess in zeal, perhaps."

"I see," Lawrence said, slightly taken back by the sheer respect in the man's voice, "The prosecution spent a great deal of time going over the deals of the Major's unprecedentedly intense training measures. I noticed, however, that they did not ask your professional opinion on whether those measures were necessary or effective."

"I cannot say for certain whether they were necessary," Grantz said, shaking his head sharply, "I am not unaware how extreme they were, but their results cannot be argued with. Not a single member of the 203rd has died or been maimed in battle under the Major's command. If an equally effective method of achieving such results can be found, this would of course be preferable, but I know of no such method."

A murmur ran through the military men in the crowd; all had known of the 203rd's famed effectiveness on the field of battle, but to have sustained no casualties? None had thought it went that far.

"No deaths?" Lawrence asked, leaning in to drive the point home, "Not a single loss?"

"Not a one," Grantz said, shaking his head sharply again, "Compared to the training the Major subjected us to, most hostile formations were by far inferior threats. Only the most elite enemy units could compare, and even then their coordination was inferior to the Major's advanced scenarios."

"I see," Lawrence said, "And how many people were seriously injured or killed during this intense training?"

"As I said," Grantz replied, "Not a one."

"I have no further questions for this witness," Lawrence said, turning away with a smile.

"We underestimated Lawrence Johnson," Philipe Marinier said with a frown, "Her behavior on the stand is nothing like the reports from the battlefield. I don't know what kind of coaching he's giving her, but it's a hell of a lot more than I expected."

"I will point out," said Fritz Nyberg, one of the junior prosecutors, "That after we filtered out the clearly-hysterical reports, we only have a few hours worth of description of her behavior from allied sources. Any soldier that engaged her directly tended to turn up dead."

"We do have reports from those that survived," another junior prosecutor said, "And do I need to remind you of what her behavior was like in those reports?"

"No," Marinier said, "Which is why we still only need to get her to crack once to show the battle maniac roiling beneath the surface. If certain parties hadn't wanted me to push for details on the Elenium orbs, I'd have tried that already with Schugel, but as it is we'll need to keep trying to find other avenues to apply pressure."

"While the ongoing Degurechaff trial has not thus far shown quite what was expected regarding the young Major, it has demonstrated precisely the sort of callous indifference to human life expected within Germanian High Command. While the very fact that a child would be deployed in a combat role of course has implications of its own, further revelations during the trial regarding the conditions of said deployment, and even the Imperial treatment of soldiers when they're rotated off of front line duty has begun to depict a grim tale of man's inhumanity to man..."

> -Excerpt from *The Londinium Times* article released at the end of the first week of the trial of Major Tanya Degurechaff.

Part 5.

"Arene was the single most reprehensible engagement I saw or took part in during the war," Degurechaff said flatly, "A quintessential example of the wastefulness of war."

"How many casualties would you estimate in the engagement?" Lawrence asked.

"Not less than four thousand fatalities," Degurechaff replied immediately, "Not more than twenty thousand killed and wounded in total."

"How many of those were Imperial?" Lawrence asked.

"Three hundred and fifty seven," Degurechaff replied, "Including eleven Aerial Mages, twenty-seven infantry officers, and three hundred and nineteen enlisted soldiers."

"So a ten to one or much higher casualty ratio was suffered by the Francois?" Lawrence asked.

"Yes," Degurechaff confirmed.

"How many of those were soldiers, and how many of them were civilians?" Lawrence asked.

"All of them were soldiers-" Degurechaff began, before a roar of outrage swept the courtroom, drowning out her, and the chief judge's attempt to bring the court-room to order.

It took almost five minutes, and expelling the entire audience, before calm finally fell over the courtroom again.

"Major Degurechaff," the chief judge, "Please refrain from deliberately inflammatory statements. This trial is already the subject of far too much public attention."

"What inflammatory statement?" Degurechaff asked, turning to face the judge with a faint expression of confusion on her face.

"The entire reason that Arene is a subject of this trial," the judge said tersely, "Is because of the civilian deaths in that battle."

"Ahem," Lawrence said, hefting a phonograph up onto his desk, "If it pleases the court, I would like to bring attention to a recording transcribed from an imperial ground mage's orb among our evidence. I believe it would be relevant to this matter."

The chief judge turned to glare at Lawrence with a dour expression, but after several long moments, ultimately nodded at him. Lawrence activated the phonograph, and a voice immediately recognizable as Major Degurechaff's emerged from it.

"Release all unaffiliated members of the general population immediately. Your slaughter of prisoners and citizens of the Empire will not be allowed to continue. We demand the release of all Imperial citizens according to article 26, paragraph 3 of the Rules of War."

A few moments passed, before Degurechaff's voice sounded again.

"This is a warning for all non-uniformed combatants in the armed revolt in the City of Arene. In accordance with article 8, paragraph 5, of the Rules of War, I demand a meeting with our representative to discuss the subjects of the Empire you have unlawfully imprisoned."

After a few moments passed, a different voice sounded.

"We are the citizens of Arene. There are no prisoners. We are fighting to be free, and will not meet with any Imperial representatives until your occupying forces have left the city."

Lawrence reached down and deactivated the phonograph.

"I believe all here have reviewed the laws of war in preparation for this case," he said quietly, "And the reason for Major Degurechaff's position on the conflict in Arene should be clear. It is documented that there were prisoners captured by the partisans, and they were not released, which means they were executed.

"By openly stating that it was the citizens of Arene themselves fighting, they also confirmed themselves as combatants, not civilians."

"Non-uniformed combatants are not protected by the laws of war," Degurechaff added flatly, "Doubly so if they have violated them."

Two of the attorneys in the prosecuting team were going red in the face, but nobody in the courtroom spoke for several long moments.

"You may continue to question your witness," the judge eventually said, and Lawrence was impressed by how composed the man was.

"Thank you, your honor," Lawrence said, turning and stepping up to the witness box again, "Major Degurechaff, to the best of your knowledge when the attack began, were there any remaining non-combatants in Arene at the time it was largely razed to the ground?"

"I did not know," Degurechaff said evenly, "Francois aerial mages had kept us from performing detailed reconnaissance or taking out partisans in surgical strikes. My professional estimation accounted for two possibilities at the time the attack began."

"Please lay those possibilities out for us," Lawrence said.

"The most likely possibility," Degurechaff said, "Was that the Francois military had persuaded the fighting-age men of Arene to fight the enemy to the bitter end, suffering a tactical defeat to earn the Francois a strategic victory by crippling the logistics hub in the city. In such a scenario, evacuation of children and most women to the countryside would have begun immediately after the uprising seized control of the city."

"Only most women?" Lawrence asked.

"Some women would choose to fight," Degurechaff replied.

"Of course," Lawrence nodded, "And the second possibility?"

"In the second scenario," Degurechaff said, an edge of contempt beginning to leak into her voice and expression, "The Francois military would have either failed to correct delusions or deliberately deceived the people of Arene into believing that they were actually capable of defeating the Imperial Army in spite of the level of response we would be forced to make to retake the logistics hub.

"In such a scenario, no effort would have been made to evacuate the women and children, though doubtless some individuals would have been wise enough to evacuate

of their own initiative. In this scenario, the number of non-combatants present would have been significant, but impossible to accurately estimate."

"I have no further questions for this witness at this time," Lawrence declared, turning and returning to the defense's table.

"Isn't that an awkward place to end your questioning?" Cara whispered quietly.

"It's a set-up," Lawrence leaned over to whisper to her, "And the judge probably knows it. The Francois prosecutors are spitting mad though, and this is one of my best opportunities to set them up to make fools of themselves in front of the judges."

Cara nodded, and settled in to wait. It took several full minutes of intense debate between the prosecution team before one of the lawyers was chosen to advance and question the Major.

"Major Degurechaff," he began curtly, "Why did you choose to raze Arene, knowing that there were likely Francois civilians inside?"

"The safety and prosperity of Francois citizens is the responsibility of the Francois military," Degurechaff said blankly, "Not the Imperial Army."

"The Francois military was not present in Arene at the time it was razed," the prosecutor ground out.

"While you are technically correct," Degurechaff said, "I personally had fought Francois aerial mages over the city earlier that same day, and we neither knew nor had any means of knowing that they had retreated during our attempt to negotiate with the partisans. Of course-"

An edge of contempt leaded into her expression and voice.

"-It is now an established pattern of Francois military leadership, using cities and attempts at negotiation to cover their secret military withdrawals. If I had been aware it was a standard doctrine at the time-"

Crack.

Degurechaff was knocked off of her chair by the prosecutor's sudden, full-armed slap.

Shocked gasps and shouts sounded from both the handful of reporters still in the courtroom, and the rest of the prosecution.

"Bailiff!" the chief judge snapped, and the burly Sergeant standing at the edge of the judge's bench stormed forward and seized the prosecutor by the collar and dragged him away.

Lawrence rushed over to the witness box to check on Major Degurechaff, but by the time he had arrived, she was already pulling herself back up onto her chair, and carefully replacing her uniform hat in its proper position.

A red handprint was visible across the left side of her face, large enough to cover her entire cheek and most of her forehead. Blood was seeping from a cut just above her eyebrow, running down over her eye and onto her cheek.

Flash.

One of the reporters took a picture.

"Next question?" Degurechaff asked, her tone as flat as her expression.

"Mister Johnson," General Parks greeted as the civilian lawyer entered his office, "I somehow doubt you've come to ask for a plea bargain at this point."

Lawrence studied the appointed chief judge for Degurechaff's trial for several long moments, before taking an offered seat in front of Parks' desk.

"No," Lawrence said quietly, "Though I find myself wondering if that's what the Francois expected when they set this all up."

"They certainly haven't made as strong a case as I expected when I was asked to preside over the trial," Parks said grimly, "Degurechaff herself is clearly not what they expected."

"I don't think anyone had an accurate understanding of just who she is going into the trial," Lawrence said, "Except for the witnesses called in from the 203rd. I'm here less

to talk about Degurechaff herself though, and more about the procedure about the trial itself."

Lawrence paused for a moment, but Parks waved him on.

"I understand that the international nature of this trial," Lawrence said, "Means that the procedures and fine details of charges are more difficult to hash out when we're trying to deliver justice that satisfies people from multiple legal systems. I knew that this would be a difficult job when I accepted it, due to the nature of the trial, and it has to be so for you as well."

"Stop trying to soften the blow," Parks said with a dry look, "What are you getting at?"

"Why haven't the charges regarding Arene been summarily dismissed?" Lawrence asked, "What happened there was horrific, but unless there's evidence deliberately being kept out of the courtroom, I don't see how the laws of war could hold Degurechaff as the responsible party."

"The other members of the panel and myself have been discussing the matter," Parks said calmly, "At a minimum, we will allow the prosecution to finish questioning Degurechaff before we make a decision."

"That makes a certain degree of sense," Lawrence sighed, "I do not like it when courts bend to political pressure, but letting the Francois prosecutors at least make their case is an amount of bending that can still see justice served. There are, however, two things I believe you should know before you make a decision on the issue."

Lawrence paused for a moment, leaning forward over the general's desk.

"The first time I met with Major Degurechaff," he said, "She was surprised that she was being given a defense attorney. She assumed that the trial was just a formality. When we met after the first day of the trial, she let slip that she thought the outcome of the trial was a foregone conclusion, and that the judge's panel had been given instructions by their political superiors to see that she was executed."

Stiff upper lip notwithstanding, Parks grimaced slightly at that.

"It is unfortunate she would be so cynical," the general said, "But given her character displayed in the trial thus far, hardly surprising. You've clearly been trying to build Degurechaff up as a sympathetic figure by the way you structure your defense, do you think we're going to dismiss all charges because she's so young?"

"No," Lawrence said, "I think you should dismiss all charges because she kept to the laws of war. I think you can use the fact that she's so young, and clearly horribly exploited by the Germanian Military, to get the Albish and Francois political establishments to accept it."

Parks' expression stiffened again, and Lawrence leaned back in his chair again, confident he'd pushed as far as was wise.

"Whether or not charges for Arene are dropped," Parks eventually said, "There is still the matter of Brest."

"There is," Lawrence said with a nod, "And you can tell the Francoise prosecutors that if they agree to drop the ridiculous charges there, I won't humiliate them in front of the whole world."

"In a bold move today, Major Degurechaff asserted that the deaths of the citizens of Arene were the responsibility of the Francois military, rather than the Germanian military, in spite of the Francois military not being present during the massacre..."

-Excerpt from *The Londinium Times* article released after the tenth day of the trial of Major Tanya Degurechaff.

Part 6.

"-The Type-95 should have allowed output sufficient to cripple or sink at least Cruisers, certainly transports, ideally to block the harbor entrance so that only a handful of ships would need to be sunk in order to stop the military evacuation."

"Thus keeping casualties to a minimum?" Lawrence asked.

"To accomplish the objective most efficiently in multiple ways," Tanya nodded, "Ideally, the attempt at perfidy would end when the illegal evacuation was rendered impossible, but conducting such a deep strike is tenuous under the best of circumstances. The window in which we could effectively engage a naval force before being overwhelmed by volume of fire was limited, and our own endurance also narrowed the window in which we could engage effectively before withdrawing behind our own lines hundreds of kilometers away."

"So the objective of the strike at Brest was crippling the harbor, not destroying the city?" Lawrence asked.

"Correct," Tanya nodded.

"What went wrong?" Lawrence asked.

"All four cores overloaded," Tanya said calmly, "Some form of feedback loop beyond my control. I hurled it at the ship moving out of the harbor at the time, hoping it would at least partially serve our assigned objectives, then ordered the 203rd to withdraw."

"What did you think would happen when it finished overloading?" Lawrence asked.

"I had no certain answer," Tanya replied, "My best estimate was based on it destroying several floors of the testing facility where it was developed when one of my testing predecessors fatally lost control. I did not have the time to estimate the relative performance of a ship hull compared to concrete, but I thought it had a decent chance at sinking the transport I targeted, depending on the timing of the detonation."

"And you had no idea it would flatten part of Brest, and cause thousands of civilian casualties?" Lawrence asked.

"No," Tanya said, "If I had expected a yield that strong, I would have targeted the Francois Warships out beyond the harbor, to both minimize civilian casualties and maximize military casualties."

"Of course," Lawrence said with a nod, "Would you have changed anything else had you known the scale of destruction it would cause?"

"I would have ordered my men to retreat more swiftly," Tanya replied, "Many of their shells were broken by the detonation, and a few temporarily lost control of their flight spells. If the Francois AA had been more disciplined, we may have suffered casualties."

"Do you have any idea what caused the Type-95 to malfunction in the first pla-"

"Blasphemy!" a new voice shrieked as a tall, almost emaciated man burst into the courtroom, "My design was flawless! If there was a detonation, the only possible cause was user-error on the part of the operator!"

Every eye in the courtroom was turned towards the intruder, but only a handful of those present recognized the new arrival, and even fewer bothered to turn their attention towards anyone else as he stormed up towards the bench.

"Schugel," Tanya hissed, and Lawrence was shocked to realize that for the first time, the girl was showing fear in the courtroom.

Only two others noticed at the time; one of the Bailiffs, who had strict orders to keep close watch on the defendant, and the cameraman for the Londinium Times.

Flash.

A picture was taken just a few steps before one of the bailiffs stopped Schugel from leaving the public area of the court-room.

"Who are you?" the lead justice demanded.

"I am Doctor Schugel!" the man bellowed, spreading his arms wide, "Chief Engineer of Elenium Arms, and designer of the inspired Type-95 Quad Core-"

"The Prosecution requests permission to bring Doctor Schugel to the witness stand, irregular though it may be," the lead prosecutor declared.

Schugel grinned madly, and the courtroom fell silent. The panel of judges shared silent looks for a moment, but they knew that while in theory they could deny the prosecutor, the opportunity to get the Germanians' prized arms researcher to start talking about his work could not be refused.

Most eyes were on the judges or Schugel; Lawrence had a suspicion that the best indicator of what Schugel testifying could cause would come from his client, and cast a subtle glance in her direction. With her composure mostly regained, there was a small, strained smile on her face, and he had a feeling that Schugel somehow showing up might be the best thing that had happened for his client this whole trial.

"As he is unquestionably a subject matter expert to the key events that occurred at Brest," the chief justice declared, "We will permit Doctor Schugel to take the stand if he is willing."

"Of course!" Schugel said, a manic light in his eyes.

Formalities and legalities had to be observed, even if they were improvised and ad-hoc, when one witness's testimony was interrupted to allow the beginning of another. Tanya was quite happy to vacate the stand so that the far larger Schugel could take the space, but there was another surprise waiting for her when she took her seat next to Lawrence at the defendants' bench.

Lieutenant Viktoriya Serebryakov had joined the audience, sitting three rows back, though she hardly would have been taken as a soldier, dressed in a stylish Albish dress, and with her hair in an elaborate coif. She looked like a wealthy man's daughter out to enjoy a public spectacle.

"Did you see someone important?" Lawrence asked Tanya quietly as Schugel was sworn in.

"Not to the matter at hand," Tanya whispered back, "A subordinate who has not been brought to testify against me."

Lawrence nodded; there was only one of her immediate subordinates that hadn't been brought to testify by the prosecution, though he didn't know why. It wasn't time to ask either, as the prosecutor started questioning Schugel.

"Doctor Schugel," he began, "You were the primary designer behind the Type-95?"

"I was the only designer," Schugel retorted emphatically, "Nobody else had the vision or courage necessary to work on the blessed Type-95."

"So it would be wholly accurate to say that you are more familiar with its capabilities and operation than any other person?" the prosecutor said.

"Of course," Schugel scoffed, "Every other hand which touched it was incompetent and inadequate. I had hopes for Degurechaff as a tester initially, but she refused to carry the blessed work through to completion."

The prosecutor smiled.

Lawrence glanced at Degurechaff; she was smiling too, and he knew that in some way or another, Schugel was about to throw a curveball through the courtroom.

"What work was it she refused to carry through?" the prosecutor asked.

"The proper utilization of the divinely-inspired Type-95!" Schugel declared, "God himself ordained its creation, inspiring me in dreams and visions to enable its creation! She was the one called to be its sanctified wielder, but she refused the call! She denied her divine destiny!"

The prosecutor's expression froze, his eyes wide, but Schugel wasn't finished.

"Oh, the things we could have done if she had not rejected God's call!" Schugel ranted, "The detonation at Brest was but the first of what could have been accomplished, and that she destroyed it in doing so is nothing short of blasphemy! Such high-energy releases were well within the Type-95's capabilities, and if properly employed, could have been repeated-"

"No further questions," the prosecutor snarled, "I wish to dismiss this witness-"

The Trial of Tanya Von Degurechaff

"I believe it is time for cross-examination!" Lawrence said cheerfully as he rose to his feet, "Doctor Schugel, I must say I have never had the unique experience of being able to speak with a man of your rarified genius. Why don't you tell the court all about the creation and capabilities of the Elenium Type-95..."

It seems we have finally discovered what the 'Devil of the Rhine,' fears, and it is not an enemy or a field of battle, but the deranged genius doctor Schugel, inventor of the device which detonated at Brest. His mad ravings both horrified and entertained the court for hours Thursday, and drew an attempt by the Germanian Ambassador to remove him from the courtroom and return him to Germania...

> -Excerpt from *The Londinum times*. The article is accompanied by an image of Major Degurechaff and Doctor Schugel, her expression showing naked fear as he passes in front of her position in the witness stand. The position juxtaposes their relative ages, and the Doctor's furious expression with her fear.

A/N: One chunk left after this, about 2.5k words.

The Verdict

Six hours after he arrived, Schugel was finally removed from the witness stand, being escorted to a seat just behind the barrier separating the audience from the active participants in the hearing. Lawrence paid special attention to how the young woman he was fairly certain was Lieutenant Serabryakov in civilian dress positioned herself directly behind the man.

There was a grimness to her expression that made it much easier to believe the pretty girl was a soldier. It lacked the unsettling blankness that Degurechaff tended to default to, but it wasn't hard to see the shadow the war had cast over both of the young women.

After Schugels' rants, Lawrence had some hope that they might be able to reach some kind of normal, healthy life once all of this was over. Unfortunately, the Prosecution wasn't quite finished yet, losing wasn't the same thing as defeat, and Degurechaff herself wasn't finished on the stand.

There was less than an hour and a half left until the court would recess for the night, and as the lead prosecutor approached the witness stand, Lawrence could tell that the man was feeling the pressure of the situation. Unfortunately, so was Degurechaff; her expression was as blank as ever, but after listening to Schugel rant for six hours, there was a tightness to her posture that he hadn't seen in the courtroom before, not even after the Francois prosecutor had struck her.

It was too late to try to do anything about that now. Schugel's unhinged words were too useful for her defense, and getting him to talk about how his designs actually functioned was useful for everyone except the Germanians. Giving the political actors a consolation prize before the verdict was even passed down would relieve pressure on the judicial panel to give an unjustified guilty verdict.

"It is clear at this point," the prosecutor said, studying Degurechaff with calculating eyes, "That your barrister is attempting to build a defense around you being forced into unpleasant but 'necessary' acts by the circumstances of war. I must give him credit for trying to thread the needle in an impossible situation, but there is a key flaw in this argument:

"Major Degurechaff, is it not true that you volunteered to join the military at the youngest age where you were eligible to do so?"

Tanya twitched, and while it was easy to see that the prosecutor took that as a sign of weakness, Lawrence knew the young officer well enough to realize that it signified something very different. Serebryakov tensing in the audience reinforced that impression, and he felt a faint sense of impending doom.

"Of course," Tanya replied blankly.

"Of course?" the prosecutor repeated with affected curiosity, "Why would that be 'of course'?"

"Laws are not enacted unless a government intends to use them," Tanya replied, staring him in the eyes emotionlessly, "The political situation in Europe was devolving towards war. Conscripts are enlisted, volunteers may become officers. As an A-rank mage potential, my conscription was a foregone conclusion.

"Volunteering allowed more time for training before the war began, seniority over fresh recruits that would flood in once the war began, and leaving the orphanage would both give me more access to food, as well as freeing up my portion at meals for the other children."

"Do you actually expect the court to believe that you joined the military in pursuit of three meals a day?" the prosecutor asked derisively.

Tanya's posture shifted slightly, and Lawrence had to forcibly resist the sudden urge to duck.

"Do you think I am so short only because I am young?" Tanya asked, and there was something different about her voice.

Several members of the audience did begin sinking low in their seats, Serebryakov shifted in her seat, and two of the bailiffs' eyes snapped towards the young Russian woman.

"I think that the only rational explanation for why you volunteered to join the military," the prosecutor said, smiling predatorially, "Is that you sought bloodshed from the start."

"You think that is rational?" Tanya said quietly, one eye beginning to twitch.

"You were the first to kill in the Great War," the prosecutor replied, stepping forward to loom over the tiny blonde, "And I've checked the numbers. Even before Brest, no one has shed as much blood as you. I think it's entirely rational to conclude that results speak for themselves; joining the military gave you exactly what you wanted:

"The opportunity to kill."

As Lawrence forced his spine to remain straight, and half the others in the courtroom slowly sank down in their seats, he found himself perversely impressed. The prosecutor had clearly and effectively communicated an image of Tanya von Degurechaff, one that even fit the threatening feeling rolling off of the young woman as her composure finally started cracking.

He had no idea that he'd read the young woman completely wrong.

One of the bailiffs moved up behind her, clearly expecting an outburst of violence; aside from another twitch, Degurechaff paid him no mind.

"Rational," Tanya hissed, pushing herself upright, and managing to loom over the prosecutor in spite of still being shorter than him, "You want to speak to me of what is rational?"

The prosecutor smirked.

He thought he'd won.

"What rational man would send a child to the front lines immediately after she had graduated from training?" Degurechaff hissed, "This is what rational men do, is it not? Send children to fight wars?

"After all, what rational government official would start a war with the most powerful military in Europe to try to improve their chances of reelection?"

"What does that have to do with you volunteering to be a soldier?" the prosecutor demanded, just beginning to realize that he had miscalculated somewhere.

"RATIONALITY!" Tanya roared, her composure finally completely snapping, "There were fifteen different assigned roles an A-rank mage could be deployed to before the war began, four of them non-combatant, three more with no real expectation of facing battle!

"What rational person would deploy a child to not just a combat role, but artillery spotter, the most exposed and frequently-targeted role in the military! What rational nation would attack another nation without provocation, because they were winning another unprovoked war? What rational leaders would continue the war for years after it devolved into a stalemate that butchered men by the hundred every single day?" Tanya leaned over the front of the witness stand, her face twisted and red with rage.

"War is the most wasteful endeavor ever undertaken by man!" she screamed, "Every ruler, every elected official, who gave the orders that continued the war for one more day should have been executed for treason!”

She continued,"Rational men would have dragged their own leaders out into the streets and beaten them to death to make the war stop after the first month of trench warfare! Rational nations would have seen the continual escalation of bloodshed, seen the cost in lives and treasure, and combined their strength to force participants in war to the negotiating table, rather than decided to join in and start sacrificing their own sons and daughters to war! There isn't a rational man or woman alive in all the halls of power in Europe!"

The prosecutor staggered backwards as saliva spattered across his face, and the bailiff reached forward to take Tanya by the shoulder, but she ignored him.

"This whole world is utterly mad!" she screamed, "Rational men would have assigned me as a healer's apprentice or the Kaiser's honor guard after the war began, but instead after I recovered from my wounds, they sent me to the trenches of the Rhine! There is no other rational conclusion except that bastards have been trying to see me dead since the war began, and the only defense possible was to always, always be better than the killers sent for me!”

The Trial of Tanya Von Degurechaff

"Of course I pushed the 203rd to the very edge of death in their training! To do any less would have been criminal dereliction of duty, preparing them to die the first time they faced the enemy! Of course I slaughtered the war criminals in Arene! They had slaughtered our people taken prisoner, and anything but the harshest possible retaliation would ensure that would happen again, and again, and again!"

"Of course I led the attack on Brest! An end to the war was finally in sight, but if the Francois army was allowed to evacuate, the bloodshed would continue for years, all the while madmen and hypocrites would expect the Empire to abide by a peace treaty that had been violated before it had even been signed!"

"Of course my execution was being prepared before this trial even began! The bloodthirsty madmen who engineered this war could not possibly allow any outcome that doesn't kill as many people as possible, as that is clearly their entire purpose, as this 'Great War' has accomplished nothing but slaughter and waste!"

The prosecutor had steadily retreated before Degurechaff's onslaught, and as he finally ran into the rail at the edge of the courtroom, her eyes snapped around to face the judges' panel.

"Give me a pistol," she snapped, "I will end this farce, and save myself whatever torturous end the sick minds behind all this suffering have prepared for me!"

"Bailiff," the chief judge snapped, and bailiff seized her other shoulder and started pulling her back down into her seat.

Degurechaff's hands darted out of sight, and there was a moment of brief furious struggle Lawrence couldn't track, before a gun came up into view, the tiny blonde struggling with both hands to try to bring it to bear on her own head, while the Bailiff had one hand trying to pull the gun back, the second pushing her away from himself.

"Fool!" Schugel bellowed, lurching to his feet and raising something in an outstretched hand, a Mage Orb that started to whine and glow gold, "God himself will strike you down for your arrogance!"

Serebryakov launched out of her seat, smashing Schugel's head into the rail in front of him, while two other bailiffs rushed forward, the golden glow built into a blinding glare, and-

---

Tanya blinked, panting with outrage as the world around her froze in a chillingly familiar way. The bailiff's hand was frozen around the gun, one finger behind the trigger, locking the weapon into uselessness, so she abandoned the pistol and cast her gaze around wildly, trying to figure out who the damnable Being X would puppet to mock her this time.

"Even now," The taunting voice echoed as the being appeared in its own avatar as an old, white-bearded man, "If you will just pray to me-"

"Wretched cur!" Tanya shrieked, scrabbling up out of the witness box, "You've done nothing but torment me from the start! Begone, I'll have nothing to do with you and your lies!"

"Even as-" Being X began.

"No."

A new voice intruded, and Being X froze.

A blinding brilliance filled the courtroom, and for a moment, Tanya could see nothing.

It slowly faded over several long moments, and when she opened her eyes again, a brilliant figure, still too bright to see clearly, stood over Being X, the 'god' pinned to the floor of the courtroom by a flaming sword.

Tanya stared in perverse and horrified fascination as Being X writhed on the ground, a glimmer of something burning away, the facade of a wise old man being stripped away, slowly revealing something much darker, twisted, and outright demonic.

"The Truth sets you free," the blinding figure declared, "As you have lied to yourself, so you have made yourself subject to a being of lies.

"Now that you finally speak the truth, this demon's power over you is broken. Remember this, lest you fall under such a creature's sway again. Truth sets you free."

Tanya gaped, her jaw working slightly as the reflex to respond struck, but she could not come up with a coherent reply.

The being of light floated over the frozen form of Schugel, and plucked the glowing orb from his hand, before crushing it.

"The demon you know as Being X will be returned to its prison in The Pit. If you are wise, you will not give it license to be released once more."

The being disappeared in a flash of light, and time in the court-room unfroze.

Schugel was smashed to the floor, his face grinding into bits of clockwork as Viktoriya pinned him down with a ferocious scowl on her face.

A second bailiff seized Tanya's shoulders and pulled her away from the first, dragging her away from both the man's gun, and his mage orb.

The gallery erupted into shouts and chaos, many members of the audience rushing to flee the room, while others dove for cover, and some even more uselessly made demands for information nobody could clearly hear.

It took a dozen MPs entering the courtroom and nearly ten minutes for order to be restored, and almost half of the audience had been removed. That was also time for the judge's panel to confer quietly among themselves, with no one capable of listening in.

"Now that the court has finally come to order," the lead justice declared, "I will announce that this tribunal has come to a ruling."

He paused for a moment, sweeping a stern gaze across the courtroom, and making sure that every press representative in the room was ready to transcribe his words.

"For reasons of not being of age and mental state to be competent to properly stand trial," he declared, "This tribunal finds Tanya von Degurechaff innocent-"

The Trial of Tanya Von Degurechaff

"Scandaleux!" The Francoise prosecutor roared, several voices rising up after-

BANG.

One of the Bailiffs detonated a flashbang spell, then seized the dazed prosecutor by his collar and started dragging him out of the courtroom.

"As I was saying," the Justice continued, glaring out at the audience, "This tribunal finds Tanya von Degurechaff innocent of wrongdoing, and summons the following officers to answer for their crimes: Corporal Harald Schatten, the recruiter who induced Degurechaff into the Germanian military, Leftenant Gunther Hade, her superior during the Norden incident..."

In a stunning series of events, after two bailiffs, members of the Royal Aviation Mage Corps, were required to restrain Tanya von Degurechaff's shocking attempt at suicide, the War Crimes Tribunal has ruled her innocent due to lacking mental competence and age. The thirteen-year-old officer has been serving in the Germanian Imperial Army since the age of eight, and the tribunal has instead chosen to summon almost two dozen Germanian officers ranking as high as General to answer for the conditions Degurechaff was subjected to...

> -Excerpt from *The Londinium Times*. The accompanying picture shows a snarling Degurechaff struggling against a large bailiff, muscles in her neck and forearm visibly straining as she tries to point a revolver at her own head.

AN: This is basically intended as both a small but complete story concept, and also as a setup for potential future YS fics. I have at least two such ideas in my mind right now, but I don't know when I'd get to them, given all the other things I have on my plate, including the newborn baby my wife and I brought home yesterday.

Epilogue

AN: Here's an epilogue, as well as a hook to one of the two sequels I had in mind. It was commissioned and written months ago, but I didn't want to post it until after I moved. Yes, I am open to commissions to start the sequel this set up, though my commission backlog is over 50k words at this point, so I can't promise rapid work.

...Somewhat embarrassingly, I've lost track of who made the commission. They paid, I sent them the finished form already, but I can't properly credit them as the commissioner here because I can't find the chat or PM log where they commissioned it. They should know who they are, and can message me the same way they did before (whatever way that was) and it should bring the chat log to the fore.

"Come in Mister Johnson, come in," the American ambassador said, a broad smile on his face, "Can I get you a drink? A snack? A first class ticket home?"

"...I wouldn't mind forgoing the expense of the latter," Lawrence said cautiously as he followed the ambassador into his office, "I take it the Hardling Administration is pleased with my work in Degurechaff's trial?"

"Quite pleased indeed," the Ambassador said gesturing for Lawrence to take a seat, "I don't think we could have had a better outcome if we'd tried. Both the actual facts and the narrative the press is building around her case work marvelously for our international standing; it's the quintessential American story, in some ways."

"I'm proud to be an American," Lawrence said, raising an eyebrow as he sat, "But I'd hardly call myself the 'quintessential' American."

"Compared to how the Europeans so often like to do things," the Ambassador said, "You very much are. You come from a blue-collar family; worked your way into and through law school on merit, paying your way in large part by working as an assistant to a railway mechanic, like your father taught you.

"You were offered the case based on your reputation for personal integrity, and the fact that you're completely unconnected to the big law firms in New Amstreldam, Boston, or

DC, that have political connections already. You don't come from some great pedigree or firm of great reputation, just a man who does good, honest, hard work, and got the job done."

"Thank you," Lawrence said with a small smile, "But Degurechaff did the greatest share of the work. She was, after all, innocent in spite of years of the pressure of war."

"And modest too," the Ambassador laughed, "You've made our Albish allies quite happy, and while the Francois have more mixed feelings, most of their embarrassment is the fault of their own prosecutor's conduct, and the judicial panel's ruling puts the Germanians in the spotlight for international embarassment."

"They have been using a child as their frontline weapon of war," Lawrence said, his expression turning hard, "They have good reason to be embarrassed."

"Quite," the Ambassador nodded, "For those who care about actual justice, you've brought Degurechaff a well-earned acquittal. For those who want to feel good about themselves, you've given us Americans and our Albish friends cause to feel morally superior, in helping a child-soldier be exonerated, while the Albish officer heading the judge's panel excoriated Germanian High Command and leadership in general for this fiasco.

"Nothing will ever come legally of the condemnation of Germanian officers, of course, but it puts egg on their faces, and that will not soon be forgotten."

"Nobody can be embarrassed by the actions of others," Lawrence said stiffly, "Only by what they do themselves."

"Not many proud men like to admit that," the Ambassador said, "But true enough. More immediate to our own national concerns though, your integrity and competence reflects well on America internationally. We want to reward that, but I'm sure you're also aware of what the reward for good work is?"

"More work," Lawrence said, his expression softening into a wry smile, "What does Uncle Sam want from me now?"

"We're offering Degurechaff amnesty," the Ambassador said, "We'd like you to convince her to take the offer."

"She is a minor," Lawrence said, "The question of whether or not she is legally competent to accept such an offer is in question."

"President Hardling and his staff have anticipated the issue," the Ambassador said with a nod, "The offer is for her, and any individual she chooses to act as her legal guardian. Given she's persona-non-grata with her own government right now, and it'd piss the Francois and Germanians off right now if the Albish tried to keep her, I believe it is in her own best interests to move to a neutral nation."

"I agree in that regard," Lawrence said, "But as she is still my client, I cannot morally or professionally give her advice against her own best interests. There are other neutral options, such as Waldenstat, though I will of course point out relevant factors such as the Unified States not bordering both the Germanian Empire and the Francois Republic to her."

"That's all I can ask of you," the Ambassador said with a nod, "If she agrees to come back to the states, her and her intended guardian stepping foot here on embassy grounds will give us all the legal standing we need to set things in motion."

"I see," Lawrence said nodding, before hesitating for a moment, "...The Hardling Administration isn't just going to try to use her as a military asset, are they?"

"The War Department pushed for it," the Ambassador said, shaking his head, "But President Hardling was firm. If she comes to the states, an offer to hire her as an Aerial Mage Trainer will be made when she reaches her majority, but it would be as a civilian contractor, not a uniformed member of the service.

"The fact that we're not at war, and don't have one looming even on the horizon, will also make it a great deal easier to keep that kind of promise."

"...That's reasonable," Lawrence allowed, "I'll make the offer."

"Is this a joke?" General Lergen asked, stone-like visage glaring at his adjutant.

"No, sir," the adjutant said, passing the newspaper across the general's desk, "It seems that the Argent has indeed been acquitted, and the tribunal sought to indict High

Command, as well as specific officers involved in the recruiting, training, and deployment of a child."

"...They decided it was better publicity to excoriate our leadership than a photogenic child," Lergen scoffed, shaking his head as he unfolded the newspaper and started reading the headline article.

"Perhaps," his adjutant allowed, before turning to leave the inner office, "I'll continue to sort the mail then."

Lergen waved him off, his already-grim expression gradually shifting towards incredulous as he continued to read the article.

"A pacifist rant?" he murmured quietly, "I will believe this when I see it."

The enormous grandfather clock began to chime, its golden bells ringing in harmony with the far deeper doom-doom-dooms of Big Ben. It had taken an expert clock-maker a day and a half to tune it to go off at just the right time to chime in harmony with the landmark of Londinium, but the King thought it was an appropriate way to show some favor to the retired craftsman who had initially created Great Britain's mage orb program.

Even if the man was Irish.

Precisely after the last chime for ten-o-clock faded, the butler opened the door into the King's study, and ushered in the foreign minister, Lord Lewis Lawry.

"Your majesty," the minister greeted with a bow.

"Lewis," the King replied, gesturing for the man to seat himself in one of the large plus chairs that took up much of the study, "I've received very mixed word about the tribunal for Major Degurechaff, and I would like to make sure we're all on the same page before I have to speak with Graf von Alvensleben."

"Yes," Lawry said, the faintest hint of a smile appearing on his lips, "This course of events was not quite what we expected, but it certainly is telling of the nature of the Germanian war effort. I've made a recommendation to the Prime Minister, and I would

like to recommend to you as well, that we lay out the expense to have copies of the mage-recordings of the Trial made and distributed."

"Was Degurechaff's tantrum really that emphatic?" the King asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Well," Lawry said with a slight smile, pulling a small mage orb from his pocket, "We both know quite well the teutonic penchant for crossing from the extreme of composure to fury. I'd say the young Major was right on the spot in showing that out. If you'd care to have one of your guards share the playback?"

"Tom," the King called, gesturing towards one of the royal mages guarding the door, "Would you come work this widget for us?"

"We have been humiliated!" General Marseilles hissed, stalking up and down the president's office, "That bitch has made a mockery of the courts!"

"She made a mockery of everyone," the President of France said, hands clasped and pressed against his lower face as he brooded, "Us, the Albish, but especially the Germainians. It has been a long time since I have seen battle, but I remember how desperate you become when you think you have nothing to lose."

"You think this was the desperate ravings of a cornered rat then?" Marseilles snorted, "Unless the transcript leaves out far too much, she was far too verbose to be panicking!"

"Do not forget," the President said, slanting his eyes over to glare at the pacing general, "She is a prodigy of prodigies, the genius of Aerial Magecraft. Is it such a surprise that extravagant rationalization is what she turns to when desperate? Her mind and magic have been her greatest weapons after all, not her body."

Marseilles sneered in disgust, but continued pacing without a word.

"How much of the Grand Armee did we lose?" the President asked.

"We have not found any further survivors along the coast for three days now," Marseilles said, shaking his head curtly, "It is well that we reported casualties in the millions, because our fatalities have been less than a tenth that."

"How?" the President demanded, pushing to his feet.

"Our ordinance masters tell me that it was due to the nature of the weapon the Devil used," Marseilles said with a frown, "It unleashed immense force, but little heat and no direct shrapnel. The ships directly beneath the blast suffered near-total losses, and the ancient construction of much of the city of Brest was vulnerable to shattering and producing dangerous splinters.

"The ships beyond the harbor mouth, however, were mostly deformed and capsized by the blast, rather than destroyed or sunk outright. Almost all of both crew and passengers made it off of these vessels, and there were some survivors among those within the harbor as well. The Devil's weapon-"

"Schugel's weapon," the President corrected.

"-Schugel's weapon," the General repeated, rolling his eyes, "Was effective at defeating our evacuation, and sinking much of our transport capacity, but it did not destroy the Grand Armee."

"Good," the President said with a tight frown, "If Germanian command reacts poorly to Degurechaff slapping them about the face, the Republic may need them again, and soon."

A frantic knocking came at the door to the outer office; Marseilles scowled, but the President's already displeased expression turned grim.

"Come in, Jacques," he called, "I know you would not interrupt for something unimportant."

"Thank you sir," the President's secretary replied as he opened the door, and ushered in a one-armed man wearing an Aerial Mage's uniform. Captain LeClerc has come directly from Londinium with a duplication of the mage-orb recording of the Degurechaff trial's conclusion."

"Excellent," the President said, saluting the soldier, "Did you see Degurechaff herself?"

"Only from afar, monsieur President," LeClerc replied, "But I could sense her mana signature. It was the Devil of the Rhine."

Marseilles' face twisted into a rictus of hate, but the President's expression just became all the more grim.

"Show us the recording then," the President said, "We must know what we are dealing with."

"Mister Johnson," Degurechaff said, greeting Lawrence with a smile.

Her smile struck him as strange, and it took him several moments to sort out why. At first it seemed slightly unhinged, but then he realized that it was instead disbelieving. The young woman found it hard to believe the circumstances she found herself in, and that warped everything about her expression, whether she was smiling or not.

For all that, it was still more genuine than the facade she had at first greeted him with, and he found that tragically reassuring, in a bizarre way.

"Major Degurechaff," Lawrence replied, "I hope the new accommodations are more to your liking?"

"Far superior to the trenches," Tanya replied, her chin twitching towards the nearest window, "It is comparable to my quarters during my time at the War College, except that I have a private bathroom, a small balcony, and two members of the Royal Aviation Corps guarding my door. What isn't to love?"

The hotel room that had been procured for her use was in a very mundane hotel simply called 'The Overnighter,' that usually served navy officers by the docks. During the trial it had been hosting the officers of the 203rd called to stand witness, and RAC officers standing guard had become somewhat normal. The 203rd were all gone now, but it was the hideaway the Albish had found to keep her away from the paparazi, and those with even more fiendish designs upon her.

"I'm sure a practical minded person such as you could name a few things if pushed," Lawrence said, taking a seat with a smile, "But I'm here with news I hope you'll appreciate. I've just come from the American Embassy, and I've been asked to extend an offer of asylum and amnesty in the Unified States on behalf of the Hardling administration."

Tanya froze for a moment, her expression turning blank. She blinked, then her eyes narrowed as she studied Lawrence.

"What do they want from me?" she asked.

"When you reach your majority," Lawrence said with a grimace, "They'll offer you a job as civilian contractor to teach fli-"

"I accept." Tanya said, pushing herself to her feet, and moving to the modest hotel room's dresser.

"...Just like that?" Lawrence asked.

"Would I like to move to the wealthiest and strategically safest nation in the world," Tanya replied with a strained, disbelieving laugh as she opened a suitcase, "Away from the various people who wish me dead, and all at the cost of taking up a teaching post? Of course I'll accept such an offer!"

"You aren't worried about getting conscripted?" Lawrence asked, and Tanya froze for a moment, her hands trembling halfway between suitcase and dresser.

"...Why I would I worry about that?" she asked, her voice cracking as she stared into her empty suitcase, "What would be the rationale in sending a unique resource like the world's preeminent Aerial Mage instructor to a war zone? There is some reason to believe the American military leadership wouldn't do something like that; I was found innocent after all, wasn't I?"

Lawrence hesitated, but only for a moment, resisting the urge to curse at how he'd bumbled over what would obviously be a rough spot for the child-soldier.

"Of course the War Department wouldn't do something so foolish," Lawrence forced himself to declare confidently, "We don't have any combat experience with modern

aerial mages ourselves, so good teaching is essential, and on top of that, getting you acquitted is a major feather in the cap of my country. We have every incentive to keep you where you can benefit us the most."

"Of course!" Tanya said, a brittle laugh escaping her lips as she swiftly resumed packing, "America is the home of understanding scale of production, whether that's automobiles or competent graduates. Well then-"

She slammed her suitcase shut, hefted it with both hands, and turned to face Lawrence.

"-Let's go get this all sorted out then."

"Now?" Lawrence said, wondering why he was startled by how swift, no efficient she was being about it.

"Of course," Tanya said, lumbering past Lawrence towards the door, "The sooner the paperwork is sorted out and I'm on a ship to America, the less likely a diplomatic incident is to make someone change President Hardling's mind."

Aerial Mages were not usually deployed as courtroom bailiffs, even during military tribunals. Captain John Miller was no exception to this, and was somewhat thankful that he had the additional charge to record the trial; keeping the recording spell active didn't take terribly much focus, but it was something.

And if there was anything The Great War had taught mages they needed if they were to survive, it was the ability to multi-task.

His ears loosely followed the actual legal proceedings, while his eyes regularly shifted between Degurechaff, the courtroom's four exits, the windows, and any Germanians in the audience. There was another bailiff directly behind Degurechaff, but Captain Miller did not see that as any reason to ignore the threat she presented, and periodically checked the distance between her and the closer guard's mage orb.

He had been chosen for this duty because he had served as one of the off-the-books exchange officers with the Francois, and while he had not faced the Devil of the Rhine

himself, he'd sensed her mana signature in the distance as she fought, and spoken with the survivors.

If she got her hands on an orb, everyone in the Courtroom without a mage shell was as good as dead.

He didn't just track her hands though; more than anything else, he watched her eyes. The eyes were what told you where a soldier's focus was, and was where you'd first see their intentions.

They also told you a lot about what kind of soldier a person was, and it wasn't hard to see Degurechaff's type. She was the type that dealt with the stress and horror of war by trying to take as much control of things as they could, starting with themselves. Her type didn't tend to be terribly good company during down times, but when the shit hit the fan, they made the best NCOs, and damn fine officers if they didn't get you killed hunting glory.

The danger to them, was when they cracked.

"Do you think I am so short only because I am young?" Degurechaff said, and Miller's attention immediately snapped to her eyes.

Nobody could handle the trenches forever. Some people broke down on the first day, or after the first time they saw someone they knew get blown away. Some gradually wore down, coping at first, but more and more poorly as time went on.

Degurechaff's type though, the ones who always tried to be in control, they held up the best under all the stress, until some line was crossed, and all that control disappeared all at once.

"You were the first to kill in the Great War," the prosecutor declared, stepping forward to loom over the tiny blonde, "And I've checked the numbers. Even before Brest, no one has shed as much blood as you. I think it's entirely rational to conclude that results speak for themselves; joining the military gave you exactly what you wanted.

"The opportunity to kill."

Captain Miller had never seen it happen in a courtroom before, but he still knew exactly what it was when Degurechaff started melting down, and began working his way cautiously towards her as she began a rant that would have her court-martialed, and possibly summarily shot if she'd given it while the war was still on.

"RATIONALITY!" the tiny officer roared, and Miller hesitated as her eyes began to pan wildly around the courtroom, wary of moving while she was focused on him.

The moment her eyes were elsewhere, he slowly moved again, but as her rant rose in pitch and fervor, her eyes were never away from him for long.

Gradually he inched closer and closer, knowing that when the rant reached its conclusion, she would either regain control, or lose what little semblance of it she had left.

The word 'pistol' escaped her lips, and Miller knew she was gone.

He hurled himself forward as she began wrestling with the bailiff holding her shoulders, in spite of the man being three times her mass, and Miller felt her mana signature faintly flicker-

~~-Discontinuity-~~

-Then he reached her, seized both of her wrists, and tore her away from the other bailiff, who promptly secured both his mage orb and his weapon, then grabbed Degurechaff's legs to ensure she was pinned down.

"Tote misch!" the tiny blonde screamed, her face a rictus of madness, water streaming from wide eyes, "Tu es!"

The recording ended, and for several long, heavy seconds, the small theater in Imperial military headquarters was silent.

"What have the Albish been doing to her since she was captured?" General Zettour demanded grimly, "This is utterly out of character for the Argent in every way. We need a physician to see this recording; perhaps she has been drugged, her eyes were unnatural at the end."

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"You speak of physicians when you have beheld treason?" General-Major von Korst hissed, "She has humiliated the Empire on the international stage! The Albish and Francois will spread this recording throughout the civilized world, and editorialize that her flagrant lies are truth to every ear willing to listen to their slander!"

"Major Degurechaff was a fierce patriot," Zettour snapped in return, "This kind of display is not natural to her, the Albish must have done something to make her crack. She has been in their hands for weeks at this point."

"As if the cause matters!" Korst snarled, "Her words are mutiny, treason, sedition! All of them at once!"

"If the Albish will not convict her," a Major shouted, the assembled officers beginning to rise towards a collective wrath, "Then we shall!"

"Silence."

All the assembled officers were familiar with the voice that had spoken, but never before had they heard it raised to such volume, or such wrath.

Every head turned to face the Kaiser, who sat between two Aerial Mage Imperial Guards.

"When I met Lieutenant Degurechaff," the Kaiser said, his voice booming through the small theater, "To see her rewarded with the Argent Silver Medallion, she seemed almost as a fragile doll one of my daughters might have kept. I thought it was disgusting and shameful how a child so young had been wounded in war."

He pushed himself to his feet, glaring at each of the officers present in turn.

"A reconnaissance posting seemed reasonable for a freshly-graduated cadet during peace-time," the Kaiser continued, his face stiff with tightly-leashed anger, "It did not even occur to me that a child would be returned to a combat deployment. Foolishly, I did not think my intervention would be required to see her transferred to a more fitting deployment for one so young.

"Can any of you, the Empire's finest strategists and leaders, say that you attempted to protect this child from further horrors of war?"

Several officers shifted uneasily; one Colonel raised his hand.

"...Lergen," the Kaiser said after studying his face for a moment, "We have only met twice, but you were commended for your competence. Why did you call for Degurechaff to be kept from the lines?"

"I first encountered her at the War College," Colonel Lergen replied stiffly, "I perceived her not to be of sound mind, as is to be expected of any child exposed to war. My objections were overruled."

"Why were they overruled?" the Kaiser demanded.

"Degurechaff's prodigious performance," Lergen replied, "Her uncanny affect was judged by the staff to simply be a side-effect of such competence in one so young."

The Kaiser's jaw flexed, and a few of the officers more accustomed to working with the man shivered.

"Have I not repeatedly been informed by you, the core of the Imperial Army's leadership, that we have been in a posture of strength at all times in this war?" the Kaiser demanded, "That barring the first month after the Francois surprise attack, we have been moving from victory to victory?"

"Yes, your highness," General Zettour said, his face grim as he met the Kaiser's gaze.

"Then if we were not desperate beyond all reason," the Kaiser snarled, "Why have we been deploying a child to fight our battles for us? Is our army not the finest and largest in all of Europe? Are our weapons not the most advanced? Our industry the most skilled? Where have we been so deficient that we need this wunderkind on the front lines so desperately?"

"...I have no excuse," Zettour said flatly.

The Kaiser snarled, his burning gaze turning to each of the other flag officers in turn, before finally landing on Lergen.

"Are you truly the only man with discernment amongst all these gathered here?" he demanded.

"In this matter," Lergen replied cautiously

"I have never seen the front lines," the Kaiser continued, moving down the levels of the theater to stand directly in front of the Colonel, "Why would the monarch travel to such a dangerous place? Have you seen the trenches, Lergen?"

"I have, your highness," Lergen replied, his expression turning flat, "Many of my duties were inspections, including the lines when I was a junior officer."

"What would you say of the Argent's reaction to the trenches?" the Kaiser demanded, staring directly into Lergen's eyes.

Lergen's lips twitched as he gritted his teeth. There was nothing he could say here that would not make enemies of at least some of the powerful men in the room, and the full truth might very well make enemies of all of them.

But Lergen had no intention of starting to lie now. Part of him was shocked his career had not been ended already by offending powerful men with the truth; why should he compromise his honor, now that the Kaiser himself stood before him.

"...It is understandable," Lergen eventually said, "Especially for one so young."

The Kaiser's anger grew further, his face beginning to twist into something horrifying as he swept his gaze over the rest of the officers once more.

"Who else among you has seen the trenches?" he demanded.

Of them all, only Zettour raised his hand.

"If you have seen such horror!" the Kaiser snarled at the aging general, "Why have you pushed for the war to continue?"

"We did not start any part of this war," Zettour replied crisply, "At every turn, it has come from enemies attacking us. Better to end this conflict decisively now, then repeat the Francois-Preussian War of last century, and ensure our grandchildren will fight it once more, with even deadlier weapons."

The Kaiser snorted in anger, before turning to glare at the rest of the officers assembled.

"Zettour, Lergen," he declared, "You will join me for a personal inspection of the front lines. The rest of you are suspended until I return."

"I say," the King breathed as the recording ended, "Quite the little spitfire, isn't she?"

"Just so," Lord Lawry nodded, "Such intellect and drive in the same person? It makes her prodigious accomplishments at such a young age much more plausible."

"Indeed," the King said, gesturing to an attendant, "It's also clear that Schugel was every bit as mad as she claimed. What have our technicians made of the orb that he tried to activate at the end there?"

"They're still reconstructing it," Lawry said with a small grimace, "I'm not familiar with the particulars; I'm certain Lord Rawlings could tell you more."

"I'll be speaking with him tomorrow," the King said with a nod, "I believe that, moving forward with relations to the Germanians, we will allow the Francois to take point."

"...Sire?" Lawry said, a flicker of surprise moving across his face.

"While it is hardly unknown what posture we were shifting towards as the war went on," the King said, "The fact remains that we did not enter it. The Francois will be furious, of course, and relentlessly attack any weakness in the integrity and honor of the Germanians and the Kaiser that they can. It is in our best interests to simply let the world know how appalled we are at the conduct of the Germanian war machine, and leave the diplomatic brawling to those already in the mud with each other."

"Of course," Lawry said, a faint smile returning to his face, "We'll give them the old stiff upper lip."

"Quite," the King replied with an equally faint smile.

"She has gone mad," the President's secretary said, staring in horror after the recording had ended.

"She should be put down as a mad dog," General Marseilles sneered, "She besmirches the Republic's good name!"

"Mad or not," the President said, eyes narrowed as he considered the sudden violence the recording had contained, "Her words are as dangerous as she was over the battlefield. Marseilles, does she sound like other speakers trained at the Imperial War College?"

"What does it matter?" Marseilles snarled, "We should have her assassinated so she is no longer a threat!"

"And create a martyr?" the President snapped back, "That would make her a far greater political threat than she ever was militarily, and when she has just made herself unusable by the Germanians! Do you think the arrogant fools at Imperial Command will tolerate her returning to Germania after that spectacle?"

"Then we are to let this insult pass?" Marseilles demanded, "Have you seen the transcripts of her words earlier in the trial?"

"I have," the President said curtly, "And I was looking forward to the little chit being executed as much as you were. After the court's ruling however, that is not feasible. I will try to ensure she does not become an issue again through political means; perhaps we can convince the Americans to take her. If she has any useful knowledge of this mad 'Schugel's' work, they will be happy to sell it to us after they coax it from her."

"The Albish could not be relied on to do so much," Marseilles scowled, "They are poor allies."

"They are temperamental allies," the President corrected with a frown, "Do not forget that it is they who applied the pressure that forced the Germanians to accept the cease fire. If the detonation at Brest had not been visible all the way from their dingy islands, Degurechaff's gambit to stop the evacuation would have seen our entire nation conquered."

The General's expression twisted in a mixture of frustration and fury, but he controlled himself.

"No," the President said, pushing to his feet and shaking his head, "As much as this conclusion to the trial has not been justice served, and it has allowed Degurechaff to impugn our honor publicly, it has been a triple-blow to the Germanians.

"First, they will never be able to use their best Aerial Mage Instructor again.

"Second, they have lost Schugel; there is no chance the Albish will allow him to return to Germania, and if his genius is so potent as is said, that may allow us to finally close the gap in mage-orb technology.

"Third, it has embarrassed the Germanians more than us or any other party to the war. The papers have been reporting on the trial at great length, and the public is eating it up. More, I am not the only head of state the Albish sent recordings of the trial to; they are spreading said recording among many of the social elite, and at considerable cost.

"Degurechaff not only put's a child's face on the suffering the Germanian war machine has inflicted, it also is a face of one of their own children, and at the same time makes it clear their leadership is so perverse as to make a child carry the burden of war in the first place.

"No, the outcome of this trial is still to the Republic's advantage, even if it is not as much so as it should have been. We should be thankful, given how close we came to destruction, that we still exist, and have time to prepare for the next war."

"The next war?" the President's secretary asked, wide-eyed.

"Of course," General Marseilles said, adjusting his uniform jacket as he regained his composure, "The Germanians must still be compelled to return Alsaice-Loirraine, and made to pay for the humiliations they have heaped upon us."

"We are not ready for another war," the President said grimly, "But in time, we will be."

"New Amstreldam," Lawrence said, smiling as the towering skyscrapers of America's largest city rose steadily over the horizon, "A beautiful city, even if it's too hectic for me."

"Is Detroit so different?" Tanya asked, trying not to let her irritation at barely being able to see over the ship's prow show, "I have read much about its industrial boom."

"The same boom has kept it from being quite so cramped," Lawrence chuckled, "Mister Bridges' Model T makes it much easier for people to spread out, rather than needing to cram everything in walking distance, or clustered around the train lines."

"Train stations can be incredible logistical choke points," Tanya nodded, "Moving material and personnel across Germania is difficult enough, and it is a fraction the size of your country."

"I'm planning on booking us a train to Detroit," Lawrence said, "Would you like to spend a few days seeing New Amstreldam first."

Tanya gave no response to that, and Lawrence turned to see she was once again trying to mask the intensity of her internal dialogue. Over the course of the trip from Albion, the young blonde had gradually stopped trying to hide when she didn't have an immediate response. He had increasingly come to suspect that her more ostentatious displays of patriotism during her time in the Germanian military, had been the result of a reflex to default to aggressive displays of what she thought the expected behavior in a given situation was.

It made his heart ache a little, seeing such a warped form of a child's natural desire to please. Would the girl have become so warped if she hadn't grown up in an orphanage? Likely only God would ever know the answer to that question.

"I do think I would like it," Tanya eventually said, "Could we visit the New Amstreldam Stock Exchange?"

"I suppose," Lawrence said, blinking a little in surprise, "Why the stock exchange though?"

"I am a firm believer in the meritocratic precepts of free market economics," Tanya said, a surprising glimmer of genuine excitement showing on her face, "I can think of no better exemplar than the world's greatest stock exchange."

"We can make time for that then," Lawrence nodded, "Are you uninterested in any of Amstreldam's famous landmarks?"

"I cannot say I am familiar with them," Tanya said, "I have never seen a live play, so I don't know if Broadway would interest me."

"What about Lady Liberty?" Lawrence asked, turning to point as the famous statue came into view.

Tanya gave no verbal reply, just staring at the statue with wide eyes, a conflicted expression on her face.

"Good God, the stench."

The Kaiser's first words as his horse approached the front lines were hardly regal, but they were altogether befitting the circumstances. He had kept himself abreast of the reports of progress throughout the course of the war, and had understood in abstract that trench warfare, unlike the conflict of the Francois-Preussian war in his grandfather's generation, was not a conflict of swift maneuver, but of grinding attritional advance.

Reading reports of incremental territorial gains and casualty figures did not prepare him for the blasted hellscape of trenches and shell-holes even kilometers behind the front lines.

The cease-fire had been declared weeks ago, and yet by the time they reached a kilometer from no-man's land, there was nothing green or growing amid the churned soil and stone between the trench lines. The smell of death and decay rapidly became overwhelming, but the Kaiser forced himself to grit his teeth and persevere, rather than turn back or call for a gas mask or something similar.

His soldiers had fought under such conditions for years; he could at least confront them without hiding his face.

That perseverance was severely tested as he had to maneuver his horse over a crude wooden bridge to reach the literal front line, the final trench before staring across no-man's land towards the Francois. Behind him, Zettour rode his own horse easily, while Lergen sat more stiffly in his saddle, the Kaiser able to recognize the signs of a man who had proper instruction in his youth, but had grown rusty with time.

"I had expected mud," he said grimly as he brought his stallion to a stop just short of the final trench, in position to look up and down that segment freely.

"Sire, the rains let up about a week after the shelling stopped," a Major from the local command post who was escorting them on foot said, "I understand the theory is that battlefield smoke provokes rain out of the skies, but that is not my field. They still come every other day or so-"

He gestured towards the overcast skies.

"-But it is not so constant as it once was."

The Kaiser nodded grimly, before turning his horse Northward, and starting to move up the length of the trench. He could see from the way dirt was smeared into the simple wooden planks laid along the bottom of the trench, how frequently mud must have filled their bottoms. Every thirty meters or so there was a sharp corner in the trench, causing it to zig-zag along the length of the front. It required more manpower to dig them out, but kept the entire length from being raked by fire from a single machine gun.

Here and there, smaller trenches ran between the next trench back, and when he shifted a little further East, he saw that small dugout caves had been created along the secondary trenches. If he recalled correctly, small cots would be set up in those, which is where most soldiers slept during their deployments to the front lines.

He did not dismount to inspect them in detail, but it was not difficult to see how cramped they must be.

It took less than a half-kilometer of northward travel before he came upon something that had not been in the reports he received and read over the course of the war.

A team of four young soldiers were prying a corpse out of the wall of a trench. His attention was drawn to it by a portion of the trench wall collapsing, and it took some time for the filthy men to clear enough of the dirt off of themselves and the body for the Kaiser to clearly see that it was a corpse, and not a fifth member of some sort of digging team.

"What is this?" he demanded as he approached, "Did the Francois break the treaty?"

"Uh, sir, sire!" one of the soldiers stammered when he looked up from the trench to see the sovereign of his nation standing above him, struggling for a moment "No, sire! We have been working in shifts to remove the bodies from the trench walls since the cease-fire began, but..."

He trailed off, gesturing to the corpse in front of him, then with another hand towards the entire area around them.

The Kaiser blinked, then raised his own gaze. Seeing a fresh, mud and blood-smeared body directly in front of him, his eyes were drawn to colors and shapes that it had glazed past before, and he realized something.

There were hundreds of bodies strewn about, just within his line of sight. Most of them lay within the ravaged no-man's land, but not all.

Not even close to all.

"Fritz," the Kaiser called tightly to his secretary, "Take a message for the President of the Francois Republic. I am challenging him to meet me personally here, on the front lines. Where is more fitting for the peace negotiations to be held?"

Lawrence was genuinely shocked by how energetic Tanya was from the moment that they entered the stock exchange. It was a good thing, because the crowd inside was as energetic and quick-moving as any other time that he had visited, and she had to be quick on her feet to not get run over by the bustling crowd of day-traders.

Her diminutive height worked against her in more than one way, and before long they ended up on one of the balconies overlooking the trading floor, where she could both see clearly and not worry about being overrun by suited businessmen. It also removed them slightly from the roar of stock traders trying to shout over each other as they made deals minute by minute.

"It's glorious, isn't it?" Tanya said, needing to half-shout so that Lawrence could hear her as they looked at the crowd below.

"It's quite a rush," Lawrence allowed, "But you know that as many fortunes are lost as are made, right?"

"Of course!" Tanya laughed, "But everyone going in made a choice to be here; they accepted the risk when they decided to invest and trade! And after all, the worst they can lose is their money, unlike..."

She trailed off, her mood and energy fading, and Lawrence winced at how easy it was for her to be reminded of the brutality of war.

"Do you want to be a stock trader some day?"

"Maybe," Tanya said, a bit of her energy returning, "It's certainly a viable option. Maybe I'll be a banker. The beautiful thing about a free market is that I can choose. Letting people choose their own course always leads to better outcomes than coercion."

"And it's more godly too," Lawrence nodded, "It's a funny thing, how often doing the right thing also works out the best for you anyways. That's why freedom is the American Way."

One of her rare smiles slipped onto Tanya's face at that, and Lawrence saw a glimmer of what might be a brighter future for the young woman.

Unfortunately, it was interrupted by a roaring chant from outside, and the two were drawn to one of the building's outward-facing balconies. Below, Lawrence saw an odd crowd of people, waving a red flag and chanting something about 'Proletariat' and 'Bourgeoise.'

Lawrence heard a low hissing, and looked over to see murder in Tanya's eyes.

"Communists."

Bonus

This editorial appeared in a Christmas edition of The Manchester Guardian, several months after the end of the Great War and the trial at which Tanya von Degurechaff was acquitted of war crimes:

Suffer the Little Children

(by Thaddeus Langwynde)

When the Great War began in June 1922, it was predicted that it would be 'over by Christmas'. Since then, four years of misery, destruction and desolation have passed, Europe has been laid waste, and millions of young fighting men and women – as well as dogs, horses, pigeons, cats and countless innocents who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time – have been brutally and bloodily slaughtered. Now, at last, it is Christmas, and we should all breathe a sigh of relief that the war is finally over.

At this festive time of year, we rejoice in the birth of a child who brought a message of peace and goodwill to all men, almost two thousand years ago. He grew up to be the saviour and redeemer of all mankind, just like all children have the potential to grow up to do great and wonderful things. At this time of year, more than any other, children should be celebrated and treasured for the joy they bring to our lives. We should never forget all those who live brief and difficult lives of poverty, hardship and hunger.

I am reminded of Stave III of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol (1843), in which the unrepentant miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, was led out onto the streets of London by the Ghost of Christmas Present, who showed him how Christmas is a time of indulgence, enjoyment and raucous celebration for many, which can enrich the lives of even the poorest, humblest folk, who are happy to spend time with their families and are grateful for what little they have. However, at the end of this excursion, just as the Ghost is about to depart, he shows Scrooge that, despite this brief period of peace and exultation, the underlying problems of society have not gone away; from where they were hiding beneath his robes, he reveals two hideous children, the embodiments of Ignorance and Want. They symbolize the millions of children in Albion who, during the Victorian period, had no hope of anything better than a brief, harsh life of being herded into factories, workhouses, prisons or whorehouses, to die of disease, hunger or petty crime, crushed by cruel machinery and the indifference of their social superiors, or sent away to die in foreign fields for the glory of a motherland that cared nothing about them. They should have been happy, healthy and carefree, enjoying their childhood, but instead they were haggard, withered and scowling, scarred as if by age. According to Dickens, "Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked." Their eyes glared out menacingly, filled with hatred and suspicion. All too easily, the

innocent faces of children can become something fearsome and monstrous, twisted by privation and suffering.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of watching the trial of Major Tanya von Degurechaff, the so-called 'Devil of the Rhine', whom Francois propaganda had for several years depicted as a monster in human form. Along with my fellow representatives of the press, I had been led to believe that she would be a feral, frenzied horror, barely capable of speech. My first inkling that this might not be the case came when I saw her physical appearance. Previously, I'd seen her as the subject of propaganda posters and political cartoons, but never in the flesh, so I was shocked when she came trotting into the courtroom, looking like a little girl in fancy dress, wearing a ridiculous hat and a serious expression on her face. Contrary to my expectations, I found her to be calm and composed, polite and well-spoken, intelligent and insightful, to the extent that I found it easy to believe that this remarkable young woman was the legendary military commander who had defeated the Francois, the Dacians and the Entente on so many occasions. But even as I considered that, I felt an overwhelming surge of pity. She was still a child, but she had been hardened and moulded by her experiences in the crucible of war, forced to grow up much too quickly, until there was nothing childlike left in her bearing or her expression. As had happened to Ignorance and Want in A Christmas Carol, all hopes of an innocent, carefree childhood had been stolen from her.

As the trial progressed, Degurechaff ignored the prosecutions' crude attempts to goad her into a murderous rage. Instead, at the prompting of her defence counsel, she told the true story of how she had enlisted in the Imperial Germanian Army because she felt that she had no other choice; she believed a volunteer would be treated better than an unwilling conscript, and at least it meant she'd be fed three times a day. In any army, there are plenty of non-combat roles that need to be fulfilled, so it really wouldn't have been difficult for her superiors to keep her safe and far away from combat – she could still have been useful to the Imperial war machine in an office, a hospital, or at the military academy, for example – at the beginning of the war, she was only eight years old, so she really should have been in school, somewhere her prodigious talents would have been nurtured – but instead they insisted on sending her into the fray again and again. Even when she tried to escape the front lines by volunteering to take part in weapons testing, she fell into the hands of the maniacal Doctor Schugel, whose twisted experiments would surely have killed her eventually, forcing her to return to where the fighting was thickest.

Degurechaff came to believe that the world was against her. From the beginning, she believed that if she refused to charge into battle against overwhelming odds, she would be executed by firing squad. She believed that her only chance of survival was to be better, faster and more skilful than everyone who was trying to kill her – and to preserve the lives of the men and women under her command, it was her duty to train them to be just as good as her, which meant 'training sessions' that most would consider to be a form of attempted murder. Much later, when she was put on trial for war crimes, she believed that it was a sham that would inevitably lead to her execution. I wish I could say that some or all of these beliefs were wrong, evidence of her still-childish mind, but instead they almost invariably proved to be correct. During the war, multiple underage youths with high

magical potential were conscripted by the Imperial Germanian Army and forced to fight, including Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov, the fourteen-year-old girl who would become Degurechaff's adjutant; their superiors took every opportunity to send them into dangerous situations that could easily have led to their deaths; and during her trial, the prosecutors were so convinced that Degurechaff would be convicted and executed that they were shamefully ill-prepared for her presenting any kind of credible defence, to the extent that they made themselves look incompetent in the eyes of the entire world – even to the point of sabotaging themselves, such as when one of them slapped Degurechaff in the face for daring to say something he didn't like, which should have led to an immediate mistrial. If they had been trying to ensure that she would get off scot-free, they could scarcely have done a better job; but the fact that they were visibly angered when she was pronounced 'not guilty' signals that this was not their intention.

Children are shaped by their experiences. Even without any kind of formal education, they are insatiable scientivores, observing the world around them and all the knowledge it has to offer. That is true of every child, but it is even more true of geniuses such as Degurechaff. From an early age, the world taught her that it was a harsh, callous place, that she would be ruthlessly exploited for her talents, and the only way to avoid pain and punishment was to follow orders to the letter and without complaint. And, in the end, she came to believe that the world was such a cruel, irrational place that the only way to save herself from worse torments was to die by her own hand. Thankfully, her suicide attempt was prevented by the swift actions of the bailiffs and others who were in the courtroom with her at the time, but this is undeniable evidence – if any were needed – of her fragile mental state and her belief that she would not be treated fairly.

To an extent, Degurechaff could be seen as a modern equivalent of Ignorance and Want from A Christmas Carol: the physical embodiment of a generation of wasted youth. Dickens was a champion of education as a pathway out of poverty, but Degurechaff's unfortunate situation can hardly be described as a failure of education; in fact, she has proved herself to be extraordinarily well-educated: a credit to the Germanian education system, or to her own diligence and thirst for knowledge? No, the ignorance that has blighted her life is of a different variety: she is ignorant of the love and care to which every child should be entitled. At an early age, she was sent to an orphanage where her needs and wants were often ignored because she was surrounded by so many other needy children, and their carers only had limited amounts of time and resources with which to care for them. Later, when she joined the Imperial Germanian Army, her superiors were wilfully blind to the possibility that her displays of patriotic fervour were just a performance. With the exception of Lt. Colonel Erich von Lergen – who has received excessive praise for being a somewhat decent human being, not least from Degurechaff herself – none of the General Staff expressed any concern for her physical or mental health, or horror at the fact that a child was being sent to fight on the frontlines of a war, or even considered the enormous stresses she was suffering under. Instead, they were perfectly happy to use her as their killing tool, ignoring the fact that she was a vulnerable child who was being exploited by those who should have had her best interests at heart.

Similarly, although Degurechaff could be seen as the embodiment of Want, it isn't the same kind of 'want' as that presented in A Christmas Carol. Like the children in that novel – indeed, like any other human being – she wants to be fed, clothed and sheltered, but more than that she has been motivated by a desperate desire to survive, which has driven her to deeds of heroic bravery and shocking ruthlessness. Imagine what she could have accomplished if she didn't have to worry about her basic survival needs! How many wunderkind just like her were slaughtered en masse, in the trenches of the Rhine or elsewhere, never to fulfil their true potential?

Degurechaff's example should remind us all of the need to love, cherish and nurture every child, not just for their benefit but for the good of everyone. Under different circumstances, if her superiors hadn't decided to carelessly throw away her life, she could have been a healer who would have saved the lives of thousands. She could have been a scientist whose works would have expanded our understanding of the universe. She could have grown up to do great and wonderful things. She still could, given time and opportunity to heal.

Almost two thousand years ago, in a time when children were often thought to be insignificant and irrelevant, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, said, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven." He treated them with compassion, blessed them, and protected them from others. He showed us that children should be loved and valued, for their innocence is an example to all of us, and God's love is accessible to everyone, regardless of age, gender, nationality or social status.

I pray that in future we will remember Jesus's words, that we will not soon forget the lessons we have learned at such ruinous expense over the past four years, and that we will take this opportunity to rebuild our civilisation to be better, fairer and more peaceful than it was before. We should protect and take care of the most vulnerable in society, such as Degurechaff once was and in many ways still is, and not leave them to be neglected and abused. I hope you will join me in trying to do better than we have in the past.

I wish you all a merry Christmas and a happy New Year. Cherish the time you spend with your children. Love them and care for them, and they will do the same for you. Be joyful and thankful that the future looks brighter than it has for a long time. God bless us every one.